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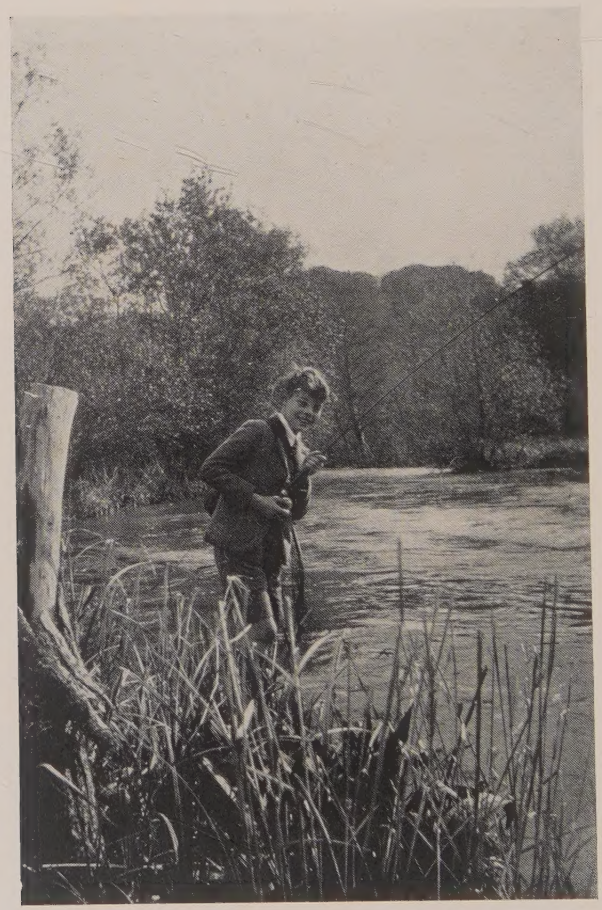
LETTERS TO YOUNG FLY-FISHERS



WET-FLY WATER: "I'VE GOT ONE!"

[*Frontispiece*

LETTERS TO YOUNG FLY-FISHERS

BY

SIR GEORGE ASTON

('GEORGE SOUTHCOTE')

Author of

'Mostly about Trout,' 'Memories of a Marine,' etc.

φιλοτιμεῖσθαι ἡσυχάζειν

(Study to be quiet)

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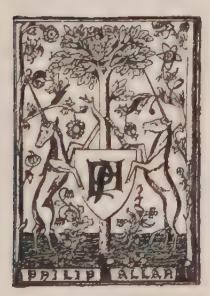

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AF*

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To

T. S. A.

And may Fly-fishing bring into his life as much
joy as it has brought into the life of
The Author

PREFACE

If you love fishing as it should be loved, you also have in you the enjoyment of peace by running waters, and of all the wonders and beauties of Nature. We cannot put such feelings into words, which can only express our thoughts. Ruskin nearly could, when he saw a fine sunset and wrote: 'The whole heaven, from the zenith to the horizon, becomes one molten, mantling sea of colour and fire; every black bar turns into massy gold, every ripple and wave into unsullied, shadowless crimson, and purple, and scarlet, and colours for which there are no words in language, and no ideas in the mind—things which can only be conceived when they are visible; the intense hollow blue of the upper sky melting through it all, showing here deep and pure, and lightness; there, modulated by the filmy, formless body of the transparent vapour, till it is lost imperceptibly in its crimson and gold.' That

is fairly satisfying. Let us try to go on with it, like this: The shadows of hedgerow elms are lengthening over the water-meadows. Insect life is becoming more abundant in the cooler air. A big wave appears upon the surface of the stream, marking the course of a great trout taking up his position for the evening rise, after dozing all day under the bank or beneath the shelter of a gently-waving bed of weeds. The afterglow of the setting sun glorifies the landscape and its reflection in the gliding water. There the blazing colours of the sunset-sky melt softly into the opalescent mists which are forming under the dark sedges fringing the banks of the river. The inverted picture shines like glass, as if polished—and in this setting, close to the sedges, we see a slowly expanding silver ring. A rising fish. Sunset and scenery are at once forgotten. We must get that beggar! Come along!

G. G. A.

Near the River Avon, in Wiltshire,
1926.

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'Fly-fishers do more than politicians to promote friendliness between nations.'
—[Letter from an eminent American Editor to the Author.]

LETTERS TO YOUNG FLY-FISHERS

I

PUTTING THE TACKLE TOGETHER

The best advice that I ever read about fishing was that given by Lord Grey of Fallodon to students at Harvard. 'If you don't like fishing, don't fish. Why should you?' To that he added: 'But if we are to be quits and you are to be on the same happy level as I have been, then find something for yourself that you like as much as I like fishing.' There is really no sport in the world like it (especially with a fly), if you really have the love of it in you. Most people have, if they only begin young enough. I read somewhere that the best way to tell whether anyone has the love of fishing in his soul or not is to watch him crossing a bridge, and notice whether he stops to look at the river or stream beneath, partly for the sheer joy of seeing

running water, and partly for the chance of spotting fish therein, and thinking how they might be caught.

Unless you have the good luck to be somewhere in the back of beyond, where fish and game are nobody's property, the first question that comes up is whether you have leave to catch them, however good a plan for doing so you may have imagined. Evolution from the cave-man hunter has made many of us poachers by nature, but Charles Kingsley—a first-rate fisherman of the strenuous sort—had a few words to say about that type, in his *Water Babies* (after Grimes the chimney-sweep was found by Tom at the bottom of the river, where he had fallen in a fight with keepers, who had caught him spearing salmon by torchlight). 'When a man becomes a confirmed poacher, the only way to cure him is to put him under water for twenty-four hours. So do you behave as all honest fellows should, and never touch a fish or a head of game which belongs to another man without his express leave; and then people will perhaps give you good sport, instead of calling you a poaching

snob.' That word 'snob' sounds rather early Victorian in these days. Kingsley, if he were still alive, would probably have written 'thief,' now that some fly-fishings, which cost next to nothing in his day, let for such huge rents. Possibly he would have added that, under such conditions, one does not ask one's more fortunate friends for fishing, any more than one asks them for their money. One waits for an invitation, and if, like myself, you are not blessed (or cursed) with riches, may you have the luck that I have had in chances of fishing other folk's waters, and in finding out-of-the-way spots where the right to fish is included in the cost of accommodation when you are away on a holiday. On the other hand, you may have all the chances of fishing for trout, grayling, or even for salmon, that you are likely to want, if only you knew how to fish for them with a fly. Whichever way it may be with you, the first need in fly-fishing is water in which to fish, so it was just as well for us to get that point settled.

The next requirement is a rod. In spite of what we have said about other people's

fishing, I should have advised you to borrow a fly-rod to get the feel of it in your hand first, if it had not been for something that once happened to me in South Africa, far from the makers of rods. I was talking over a day's sport with the keeper of the trout hatchery in old Cape Colony. He persuaded me to try the feeling of his beloved rod, I believe his only one, which through years of use had become almost a part of himself. It was a beautiful little rod, of split cane, supple, elastic, and at the same time stiff, springing evenly from hand to tip. We were standing on a strip of grass in front of his house. I let out line, waved it in the air, and laid it out straight on the grass. Then I raised the rod, for a long cast. The fly caught in a flower-stem with a jerk, just as it was leaving the ground. The sudden strain caused the middle joint to snap like a carrot. Most people keep spare top-joints. No one keeps a spare middle-joint. My friend was rodless for the remainder of the season. It is not a pleasant story. I have only told it to save you from even the off-chance of a similar disaster, with years of

regret to follow. Fourteen of them have passed over me since that disastrous incident, and it still comes back sometimes !

We will not dwell upon that. It would never do to start upon the joys of fly-fishing on a tragic note, so let us now imagine the first of these joys, the possession of a rod and tackle and the excitement of putting them together. There are two ways of doing everything, a wrong way and a right way—which is only learned by experience ; one's own, for choice, as we are none of us exactly alike. Rods differ as much as we do. The particular rod that I have in my mind now does not belong to me, but to a boy of my acquaintance. It has two joints, a butt of whole cane, a top of greenheart, 'snake' rings that stand out so that the line runs through them nicely, and aluminium fittings to hold the reel. It was made by a first-class maker,[1] and it cost only about seven shillings. The length is just seven feet. I taught its owner to cast with it, and in doing so I became so fond of it that I was always wanting to take it out of his hand

[1] Hardy Bros., Alnwick.

and cast myself. When he is at school I am sorely tempted to borrow it, in spite of the above warning about using other people's rods.

I want to imagine that the rod and tackle have either been Christmas presents, or gifts for a birthday which comes when trout are out of season. The reason why I suggest that is that you will then put the rod and tackle together in the off season, and we shall have time to do slowly the little things that matter so much, without wanting every minute to get away to the actual fishing; and it does make a lot of difference, later on, if one gets at once into a habit of doing all those little things as a matter of course. Putting the rod together is the first of them. You pull the plug out of the top of the butt-joint, and it comes out with a little pop, if the fitting is air-tight, as it should be. I love that little pop, it brings back memories of the start on so many happy fishing days. Sounds and scents have a way of doing that, even more than scenes—but let us get back to putting the rod together.

The obvious thing to do next is to fit the

top joint into the butt, but I do not advise that ; you may get a stuck joint, which may give you a lot of trouble. You will get plenty of advice about how to get the parts free if you do. One trick is to light a match, warm up the metal socket to make it expand, and then it is supposed to release itself. Another way is to twist a bit of wet string or a damp cloth round the top, near the joint, and pull to make it turn and so clear itself. There are various other tricks, but whichever of them you try, be careful to grip the two parts as near the joint as you can, otherwise you may break the rod. My own experience of stuck joints has not been a happy one, and the special tricks for clearing them do not seem to work with me. Once I had to keep a rod together, far away from the stream which I fished, for about three weeks, and the end of that story is that I sat down upon it in the back seat of a car, on my way to a day's fishing. Well, the moral of the whole thing is that prevention is better than cure, and it is quite easy to avoid stuck joints by smearing a little fat over the upper part before you fit it in. Neither vaseline nor oil

is of much use, fat is the best. I only found that out myself quite lately, and it is really worth knowing.

Having fitted the parts of the rod together, the next step is obvious; fix on the reel, with the handle on the side that you want it. Most people prefer to have it on the right side, although that means changing the rod over from the right hand to the left if they want to wind in line when playing a fish. I like the reel-handle on the right side myself, but hesitate to give any advice about which hand to hold the rod in when you play a fish. I used to say the left, until I tried an experiment to settle the point last season. As, however, you are probably bored with all this instruction and think that it is high time for some actual fishing, I will end here and tell you the result of the experiment in my next letter.

II

PLAYING A BIG TROUT

When I promised in my last letter to tell you how I found out, by experiment, in which hand I held the rod when I was playing a big trout, I had no idea that I should be able to recall so much of a gorgeous experience. I enclose a photograph[1] of the 'location,' as the cinema-folk would call it, taken from the other side of the river which flows past my garden. Approaching the spot from my side you come to the little gate in the low wooden paling, shown in the picture. Beyond the paling is a small landing-stage, about eighteen inches wide. Beyond that the river, about ten yards wide, with a smooth, steady current. A deposit of mud over the gravel bottom makes wading difficult, and besides that the river was too high for wading at the time. (When the water was lower I did

[1] Plate ii.

jump in at this spot once, some years ago, to follow a fish that bolted downstream when he was hooked, though I had on a new suit of flannels, and no waders !) The landing stage extends only for five yards, and you are stopped at each end by bushes. Upstream, to my left, a tangle of brambles hangs over the water, holding up some drift-weed which has caught on the thorns. To the right (downstream) is a boat-house. Hanging over it, with boughs projecting over the roof, a hazel-nut hedge. Close behind, a big spruce fir, with branches projecting overhead and behind the angler. Both ends of the boat-house are open. The outer piles supporting the roof are about five feet from the bank. These piles are holding up some drift-weed, which is constantly being added to. With the battlefield in our minds, we can now get to the battle, bearing in mind that the wind was blowing gently downstream.

First Stage.—A broad, dark nose breaks the surface a couple of inches clear of the bramble (to my left, upstream).

Second Stage.—Plan of campaign. The

SCENE OF THE BOAT-HOUSE BATTLE [*p.* 10

fly must be put over the fish, but how? I had one advantage, the tree behind and above me prevented the trout seeing me against the sky, but made it impossible for me to raise the rod without getting the line caught up. The fly would probably catch in the boat-house if I tried to cast underhand, swishing the line straight downstream and then forward. The only solution seemed to be to flick the fly downstream and outwards, towards the middle of the river, so as to clear the boat-house and the hazel-boughs hanging over it, and then to 'bowl' the line forward, with a straight arm, and so drop the fly on the water just clear of the brambles and let it float over the trout's nose—keeping the rod as low as possible lest it should show against the sky.

Third Stage.—Contemplation. I knew that fish of old, as being exceedingly wary and shy of gut. Finer gut was indicated, and special care with the knot. I had a fine 'point' with me, well soaked and supple. Dry gut and a newly tied knot generally mean disaster with a big fish. I usually find this knot good enough for fastening gut together.

Lay the two parts alongside each other, like this :

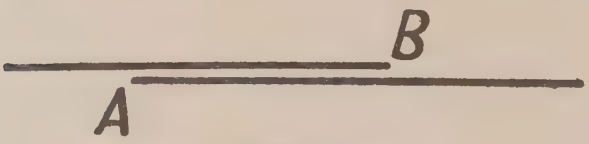

Diagram 1.

and tie both together with an ordinary overhand knot, like this :

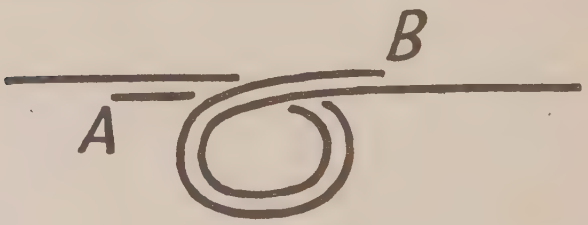

Diagram 2.

Diagram 3.

This time I took the extra precaution of turning the ends round in 'half-hitches,'

like this (see Diagram 4), and it was just as well that I did, as will appear later.

By the way, I ought to mention that some

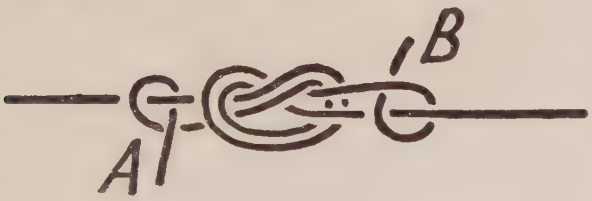

Diagram 4.

people, after making the overhand knot (Diagram 3) tuck the ends (B) through again like this :

Diagram 5.

But I have always found that No. 3 holds well enough.

Fourth, and last, stage.—The battle. I opened the gate, crept on hands and knees on to the landing-stage, closed and fastened the gate gently, flicked the fly outwards and bowled it forward, upstream, keeping the rod

low. It landed on the drift-weed by the bramble, two inches from the trout's nose. The rod was in my right hand. With the left I pulled the line, very slowly, through the rings on the rod. It caught in a small, loose twig. I went on pulling slowly, and drew the twig off the weed. It dropped into the water, very gently, and floated down to my feet. Having secured and detached it from the fly I waited for a few minutes, dried the tackle, and tried again. This time the fly dropped about six inches outside the spot where the nose had appeared, and about three inches beyond it. In two seconds I was on my feet, holding with my right hand a rod bent nearly double, the reel spinning madly as the hooked trout made off upstream, and screeching as it span.

To describe the whole battle would make this letter much too long, and we must not get ahead too fast. We only meant to find out how one uses one's hands in playing a fish, so as to make sure about fixing the reel on the rod the right way round. After the first long rush upstream, that trout turned round and came at me, just too fast

for me to wind the line in quickly enough to keep the line fairly tight (an important point). I passed the rod to my left hand, stretched my left arm up to its full extent above my head, and so just managed to keep the line taut. Then I wound in line with my right hand, gradually lowering the left which was holding the rod, until it was in a comfortable position in front of me, keeping the rod-point up all the time, so that, if the fish pulled hard suddenly, the bending of the rod-top would prevent his breaking the fine gut. So things went for a time, letting out and winding in line alternately to tire the fish. Then some excitement. The fish made for the near bank, upstream, boring steadily towards a little bay beyond the brambles, where he had taken the fly. It was an awful moment when the gut touched a bramble that was dipping in the stream. The only way to clear it was to pass the rod into my right hand, checking the line with the first finger, above the reel, reach out over the river as far as I could, holding on to the paling with my left hand. By that time the trout had worked round

into the bay beyond the bramble, but I could just keep the gut about an inch clear. Hauling as hard as I dared, with the line jammed against the rod by my finger, I just managed to force the trout to turn his head outwards, and to move into the middle of the river again. Then the rod went back into my left hand, the right to the reel-handle, and I felt happier.

There was worse to follow. The photograph will explain, if we remember that much weed had drifted against the piles of the boat-house. The fish came steadily downstream, about the middle of the river, and the gut disappeared under the drift-weed, outside the boat-house. What was to be done? It was a time for desperate measures. The fish must be kept clear of the weeds, and hauled up, against the stream, till I could reach him with the landing-net. The rod went at once to the left hand, a finger jamming the line, and holding on to the paling (this time with my right hand) I just hauled with the left, the rod bent nearly double and almost at breaking-point, but turned with the rings upwards to ease the

strain a little. Inch by inch the fish came up, until I judged that he was clear of the pile and the drift-weed. It was then easy to drag his head towards my bank. The rod stayed in my left hand. The right hand left the paling for the reel-handle, and I let the fish back a few inches inside the boat-house to ease the strain and to think matters over. The little greenheart rod (8 feet long) had performed wonders. Could I get that fish up to me without breaking an old friend, that had served me well? I studied the river. The current ran strongly in the middle, and under the opposite bank; less strongly on my side, and there seemed to be slack water close under my bank.

I decided to chance it, wound in line slowly, at the same time drawing the trout nearer the side, the rod still in the left hand, the reel-handle in the right. Then, at last, the fish was within reach of the landing-net. He was swimming upright, showing that he was not yet quite exhausted (I was, nearly!), but things had gone far enough, and it was time to try the landing-net. I was crouching against the paling to try to keep out of sight,

and I lowered the net into the water behind his tail (head-first is the proper way in, but that was impossible), then I lowered the rod-point, gently, till he was well in the net, when I heaved up steadily, and the battle was over. His weight doesn't matter. Spirit counts more than size in a fish, as it does all round, but his actual weight was $1\frac{3}{4}$ lb. A gallant fish, short and thickly built, in fine condition.

In which hand, then, does one hold the rod when playing a fish? Sometimes in one, sometimes in the other. So let us fix on the reel with the handle to the right, unless we are left-handed and find that hand best for winding in line, and that takes us back to putting the rest of your tackle together in the best way, which will be the subject of the next letter. It was great luck for me that I had to try that experiment to make sure about the reel, as it led to that exciting battle. You will have lots of them yourself, I hope even better.

III

PUTTING THE TACKLE TOGETHER, AND TRYING IT

By the way, before we go on with the subject of tackle, I ought to mention that you are seldom likely to have such a difficult job in landing a fish as I had with the one that I hooked in the experiment, described in my last letter.

Generally you can get along the bank, which I could not. All that you have to do then is to keep a little below the trout that you have hooked, with the point of your rod up all the time, and you soon learn how to keep a steady strain on the line, winding in whenever you get a chance, and letting the trout run if he pulls too hard, until he is exhausted and obviously ready for the landing-net. The fish will soon teach you that lesson! Keep the line tight all the time, if you can, unless he jumps out of the water.

If he does, dip the top of the rod for an instant. 'Curtsey' the rod, is a good name for the movement.

Having fixed on the reel, the way to run the line through the rings is obvious. Then the cast of gut goes on, well soaked first, to make it supple. About two yards of cast is quite long enough for a short rod. If much longer, you will probably wind some of it through the ring at the top of your rod when

Diagram 6.

landing a fish. The knot may then catch in the ring if the fish takes out line again, as they often do when they see the net. I tie the line to the cast like this (a ' single bend ') and I leave plenty of end, enough to flop about, as I find that then the fly is less likely to catch in it, when flicking it about in dry-fly fishing. I hope that the drawing explains itself (see Diagram 6).

Some people tuck the end away to make it point towards the fly, like this :

Diagram 7.

I find that knot less easy to undo, and I seldom use it, as the other one has served me well. The fine ' point ' of gut, if you are using one, goes on the cast with the knot that I drew in my last letter (Diagrams 1–5). Putting small eyed-flies on to the gut is a tricky business, if you fumble about with the tackle and the eye of the hook. The usual way to avoid this fumbling can be gathered from these pictures.

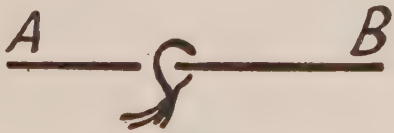

Diagram 8.

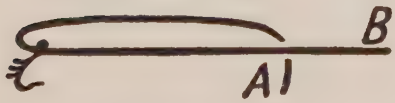

Diagram 9.

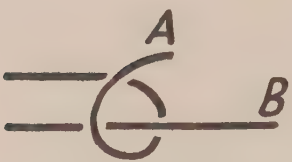

Diagram 10.

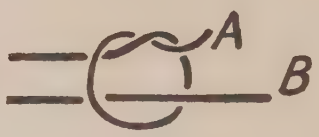

Diagram 11.

Then, if you let go end A, hold the hook in your left hand, and pull end B slowly with your right you will get result No. 12:

Diagram 12.

If the hook has a big eye, it is safer to tuck end A round, pass it through as in Diagram 13, and pull it tight:

Diagram 13

It is not usual to use more than one fly when fishing ' dry,' though some people do, in strong water. With wet-fly, both in streams and on lochs, I always use three flies, as I find that they seem to ' balance ' better than two, when I am casting them. There are several ways in which to fix the ' dropper ' flies on to the cast. I like making them stick out straight, to give the fish a better chance of getting a hold of the hook, so I cut the cast and join it together again in the same way that I fasten on a point, but leaving a long end when tying the knot. If you look at the drawing Diagram 4 (page 13) and imagine end B about three inches long, you will get the idea.

By the way, while we are on the subject of casts, I may as well add that I like them tapered, from stout gut to fine (3x or 4x) for dry-fly fishing, but not tapered for wet-fly fishing, as then the gut is too thick near the dropper flies. The same with lines; tapered for dry-fly, not for wet, but the tapered does well for both, the only point being that for dry-fly it has to be thoroughly well greased, twice a day if possible, when

you are fishing, to make it float. (This greasing is the one thing in dry-fly fishing that one has to remember always about one's tackle.[1] If the line sinks, and becomes water-logged, it is a perpetual nuisance instead of being a constant joy). Another subject that I did not enlarge upon is the reel. Good ones with big narrow drums are expensive, but they are worth their weight in gold. A bad one spoils many a day's fishing. I think that that is all that we need bother about on the subject of tackle, for the present. We have put it together, and we are ready to start. There is one little trick, that I was put up to the other day by an experienced angler, about the best thing to do with the fly when not in use. Hook it into one of the rings on your rod. Pass the gut-cast round the socket of the reel, and then wind in line until it is taut—like this :

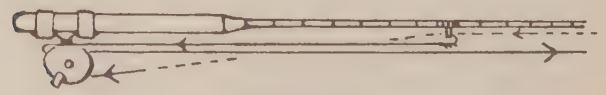

Diagram 14.

[1] The only lines, to my knowledge, which would float without constant greasing were those made by the late Mr. W. D. Coggeshall, the 'Member for America,' affectionately known as 'Coggie' in the Fly-fishers' Club, and once President of that delightful resort of true sportsmen.

Having learned that little trick, you would probably like to wave the fly about in the air for a bit to try the rod. You cannot do too much of that. No one ever taught anyone else how to use a fly-rod by written instructions, but what you want to get to is the feeling that you know exactly where the fly is in the air, the whole time when you are casting. If you once get that feeling, the rest is easy. If I were you I should put a wee bit of white kid leather on the hook, to help you to watch the fly all the time while you are waving it about. Begin with a short line, and gradually lengthen it. Do not use much force. Let the rod do the work. Get used to its spring, and especially to the *timing* of it, which is half the battle. If you get the fly back properly it seems to come forward properly of its own accord, if only you incite the rod to put it forward *exactly* at the right instant, just as it is starting to do so of itself. Above all, take every possible chance of watching a good angler casting. A pennyweight of practice is worth a ton of theory in fly-fishing as it is in most arts.

There is just one more point, before we start. However good a fly-fisher you may be, you are fairly certain to get your fly caught up occasionally in branches or other obstacles, especially in a high wind. I do not know what your views are about difficulties. Some people try to dodge them. Others let matters slide till they are obliged to tackle them. My own particular fancy, in sport and in other things, is that the best course is to go straight at them. Take this business of getting hung up, as an example. As you are certain to be, sooner or later, I should advise you to get hung up at once, and learn the easiest way to get clear. Throw your fly over a gooseberry bush, if there is one handy, or a bramble, or a barbed wire fence. Anything of the sort will do. If you raise your rod quickly when you are hung up, it is ten to one that the hook will catch. You may then have to break, if there is water between you and the obstacle. If you lower your rod, point it at the fly, and wind in line, or pull it through the rings, *very* gently and slowly, it is about a hundred to one that the fly will drop clear. You will

bless me all your life if you take that advice, but I confess that I do not expect you to. Someone, I fancy that it was Bismarck, once said that 'fools learn by their own experience, wise men by other people's.' Judged by that test there are not many wise people about, and anyhow it is high time that you started for the river.

I will imagine that trout are in season by this time, and that you are an optimist, so you take with you a landing-net; you can get them for various prices, the water-proofed silk ones are the best, as they do not shrink. A big, deep one makes things easier when landing a difficult fish, and it is important to sling it on you so as to be ready when wanted, and not in the way of walking or casting at other times. You can try all sorts of methods in tackle shops, but test them for that quality. If you are hopeful enough, you will also take a bag or a creel, on a strap, which I find most comfortable over my right shoulder when casting right-handed with the rod. The butt does not then catch in the bag. Take care to have the strap fairly short, so that the bag or

basket rests comfortably in the hollow of your side, and does not flop about. These details sound rather fussy, but they do make a difference. They keep one fit and fresh in a long day's fishing. You will probably want to take a short cut to the river, and if you have to go through a copse, or past straggly hedges, on the way, you will avoid delay by carrying your rod butt foremost (see the photograph enclosed).[1] I learned that tip from a man who has fished much in the backwoods in Canada, and it has made a good deal of difference in my comfort.

Now, at last, we will think of nothing but trout, and how to catch them with a fly; let us say a dry-fly first, although it is generally supposed to be more difficult and more 'scientific.' You can make it so, if your taste runs that way, but in my opinion it need not be either. Having arrived at the trout, I am going to give you the only rule that he follows, according to my experience. If you see him or locate him first, you may catch him. If he sees you first, you will not. His head being upstream, it is fatal to walk

[1] Plate iii.

THROUGH THE WOOD

[p. 28

downstream along the bank. It spoils your own sport, and everybody else's.

What a long sermon, mostly 'Don'ts.' It is high time that I ended this letter. I hope that you will have caught a trout by yourself by the time when I write again. There is nothing like doing a thing first and then learning how to do it afterwards.

IV

A FIRST DRY-FLY DAY

I AM going to assume that we are both so keen that we arrive too early at the bottom (downstream end) of the water on which we are going to spend our first day with the dry-fly. Trout are not moving yet, so we have plenty of time to enjoy our surroundings and talk over our plans and ideas. We are in the Mecca of dry-fly fishers, a chalk-stream valley in the south of England. The time of year is spring, or early summer, when nature is at its best.

This is what we are looking at, and, consciously or not, we are storing it all up to dwell upon in later years—perhaps in desert lands where running waters are not. Cool, crystal-clear water, coming from deep springs below the chalk in the valley above. Water-meadows, brilliant with wild flowers and rich vegetation, interspersed with sparkling

runnels and streamlets. Cattle standing pensive, knee-deep in the rank meadow grass or on the gravelly bottom of the main river, between dark green, gently waving weed-beds. High hedgerow elms provide shady resting-places in the dry patches of pasture, and, on higher ground, beech-trees in tender green leaf luxuriate in the chalky soil of the downs that enclose the valley. " I am sorry for you, ma'am," said Turner, the artist, to the old lady who told him that she never saw colours in nature like those which he used in his sunsets. What sympathy can help those, if such there be, who find no enjoyment in the delicate transparent green of beech-tree foliage when spring-time is with us in England? That is enough about the surroundings. In spite of old Izaak Walton's (and St. Paul's) pleading to ' study to be quiet,' we are young enough to want to be off somewhere, to do something strenuous. This gives the idea :

When all the world is young, lad,
And all the trees are green ;
And every goose a swan, lad,
And every lass a queen ;

Then hey for boot and horse, lad,
And round the world away;
Young blood must have its course, lad,
And every dog his day.

That is Charles Kingsley, of course, and it takes you on to R. L. Stevenson's warning that, however strenuous work or sport may be, it is fatal to get 'busy' over it—'Extreme busyness is a sign of deficient vitality,' is the way he puts it. If once you get busy over fishing, it is ten to one that you will hurry too much, and leave out the important little things that make so much difference in a day's sport, such as testing your gut before casting over a big fish—but I am touching the 'teacher' note now, and I meant to avoid that.

Izaak Walton started the fashion of writing fishing-books from master to pupil, but his imitators never seem to be able to follow in his footsteps. In one such book on dry-fly fishing the author makes his pupil do all sorts of idiotic things, and then jeers at him. Then the teacher does each thing himself perfectly, as it ought to be done (but hardly ever is done), just to show off his skill. Most

likely he would have bungled under such conditions. That idea applies to all games and sports, and to most other things. Bishop Paget had hold of the right idea, when he said at Eton, forty years ago, that 'Simply to detain with pleasure the thought that one is doing a thing effectively is to begin at once to do it less well.' We seem to have started sermonising again, so let us watch the river. It is worth watching. So is the life on its surface, at times. At present a furry, beedy-eyed little water-vole is swimming upstream, close to the bank behind us. If we keep quite still he may not see us. He does, and at once he dives, and a ring of ripples goes out from the bank. When wandering upstream on the lookout for rising trout, one often sees a ripple like that coming out from the bank ahead, and sometimes it deceives, but as a rule the ripples made by a water-vole are too constant; those from a rising fish die down more quickly, and return when he rises again.

Trout are late in moving to-day. There was a bright moon last night, and I always imagine that the rise is later under such

conditions, though that may be only my fancy. Most anglers spend their lives in making rules for trout, and trout spend theirs in breaking them. Shall we practise casting until the trout begin to move? We shall do no harm; I happen to know a bit of water close by where there are no trout, and we can still get a view from there of the main river, in case things begin to happen. Anyhow, we can make a start.

If you have often been waving your rod about, with a line and cast on it, since it first arrived, you have probably become used to the spring of it, and you have some sort of idea where the fly is in the air all the time. The next step is to be able to control the fly's movements, and it is much easier to do that if we take hold of the line (with the hand that is not holding the rod) between the reel and the first ring, like Diagram 15.

Now, holding the line like that, I should try waving the fly about in the air again for a time, until you get the feeling that there is always just a little pull on the line, if you keep your left hand still. I wonder if that helps you at all? It is almost impossible

to describe in writing how to do things with one's hands; it is all a matter of practice, and finding out what suits one best.

For dry-fly fishing it is well to wave the

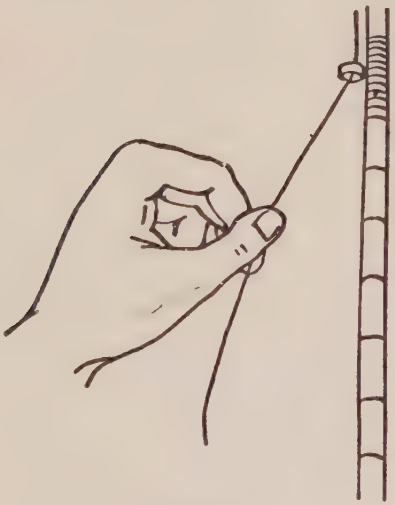

DIAGRAM 15.
'HOLDING THE SLACK.'

rod to and fro fairly fast, so as to feel (not to hear) just a little flick each time the fly begins to go forward again. This dries the fly, but the principal art is to let the line out to its full extent in front of you, and to time

exactly the right instant to bring the fly back again. If it goes *back* right, with your left hand feeling a little strain on the line all the time, you seem to *feel* the right instant to let the spring of the rod bring the line forward again, just *helping* the rod with your right hand. With a short line (the most difficult, to my mind) the rod wants little, if any, help. The longer the line the more force, but always less than one feels inclined to use.

This attempt at a description makes me wish, more than ever, that we were really together by the side of a stream, instead of only being there in imagination. If the timing of the swing of your rod to and fro does not come naturally yet, I imagine myself holding your wrist for a bit while you practise, and I advise you to get someone else to do this, if you find that it does not come with practising alone. Watching someone else may help you a little (not much). If there is no chance of doing this, there remain the 'movies,' or motion pictures. Several fly-fishers have produced fishing-films, both in England and in America, but the difficulty

lies in getting a chance of seeing them, unless you happen to have a private projector. The English one of dry-fly fishing is called *A Fly-fisher's Festival* (New Era Films Company), but only a small bit of it shows the actual casting. I wish that someone would film the whole process, but there would perhaps be no market for it. The 'Renters' think that the contemplative man's recreation is not much in the line of picture-hall audiences!

As nothing is happening on the main river yet, we will just touch the fly and the gut-point with a little brush, dipped in paraffin, to help it to float, flick about in the air again once or twice, and then cast it forward, this time laying the well-greased line out on the water. Let us throw downstream first, because the strain will then pull our tackle out straight for us. Watch the fly, floating down. Lower the point of the rod. Take in a few inches of line with the left hand, holding it all the time between the finger and thumb, and then, when the line is straight, use the rod to lift it off the water. Lift the fly into the air *upwards* and back, increasing

the speed of the rod until the butt is upright. When you stop the butt you will feel the spring of the rod when the top bends beyond the vertical. At the *exact* instant when the top comes forward again of its own accord, just help it to do so. This will put the line out over the water again. Aim the fly (in imagination) not at the water, but about a foot higher than that, and it will then drop lightly.

All this will happen, almost of itself, if only the line was well extended when you picked it off the water. When you have managed that all right, try a cast upstream. Watch the fly floating down on the current, and remember that the current is at the same time floating your line down towards you, so unless you gather it in (not enough to pull the fly) you will have to pick up a slack line, instead of an extended one, for your next cast. Here the work with the left hand comes in. You can keep the line taut by holding on with that hand to all the slack line that you have gathered in, and you can ease that slack out again while you are waving the rod about again to dry the fly. As soon

as it is all out, cast again. (For a cast too long for the rod to manage comfortably, you can hold a yard or so of slack line in hand till the last moment, and then let the moving line pull it out as it goes forward.)

What a wilderness of words! They have come to an end at last. We have just spotted the rise of a trout on the main river, so the time has now come for deeds, and the most important thing in the world is, somehow or other, to drop our fly lightly on the surface so that it floats down within view of that trout, without his seeing us, or the rod, or the line, or the thick gut of the upper part of the cast. If only we can do that, it may be that the fly will disappear. The line will then tauten, the rod will bend to the butt (if we keep the point up), and the butt (and we too) will thrill with that feeling of life and struggle that repays, over and over again, for all the care taken in preparation. Let us creep, very cautiously, up the bank towards the spot where that rise appeared, keeping low, and carrying the rod butt-foremost, so that the trout shall not see the top above the sky-line.

V

A FIRST DRY-FLY DAY—*Continued*

WHAT sort of a rise shall we choose? Is it from a big trout, meaning business, or from a wee one trying to eke a livelihood in the middle of the stream, because his betters drive him away from the best places near the bank, where the current drifts fleets of floating flies down at a convenient pace for absorbing them at leisure? One soon learns to tell a rise of a big fish from that of a small one, wherever it may be. There is something more leisurely and dignified about it. Some experts can tell also whether the rise is at a floating fly, or at something just below the surface. Some can even distinguish, especially during the evening rise, the exact sort of floating fly that is being taken, without seeing the fly itself, all from the look of the rise and the sort of wave that it makes. Do not let us bother about all that yet. Let

us assume that this rise was at a floating fly, as we saw the trout's nose come up and take one. Now for the great moment! How are we going to induce our fly to float past that trout exactly in the same way that the natural fly did?

Much depends upon where the rise was—near our bank, out in the stream, or near the far bank. Also upon which bank we are following, and whether we can cast with the left hand as well as we can with the right. (I wish that I could. It is well worth your while to practise first with one hand and then with the other from the very first. I did not, and so can only use my right.) I am going to assume that we are stalking up the 'right' bank, which of course means in geography the bank which is on your right when you look downstream. I am also going to assume that you can get your line out all right, and that a gentle breeze is blowing upstream, to take the cast of gut and the point out for you. The rise is far enough away from the bank for the fly to fall clear, without catching up in anything. I can only add that I hope most sincerely

that you will be lucky enough to have all these conditions in your favour on your first real day with a dry fly.

After a cast or two on the water, well away from the rise, and well below it, to measure the distance, you manage to drop the fly lightly about a foot above the spot where the rise appeared. Here it comes, floating gaily, well cocked and buoyant. Remember that the line is floating down too, so either creep back slowly or draw the line in with your left hand—on no account fast enough to pull the fly, which *must* float naturally, as if there were nothing attached to it. As the fly gets within an inch or two of the rise there comes a moment of breathless excitement. Then (let us keep our luck) the fly disappears in a little swirl. Very likely the swirl precedes the disappearance of the fly. You have got him! By which I mean that the battle has begun, not ended.

I wonder what your temperament is like? You will know now. If you are very 'quick in the uptake,' as the saying goes, you will probably do what I did, when I met my first big trout with a dry fly. I had read a lot of

nonsense about ' striking,' the instant that a trout took my fly, so I did what I thought that ' striking ' meant ; I jerked the rod up. Away went the trout, with the fly and the fine gut, broken off short. We will not dwell upon that moment. Some things in life are better forgotten. My idea is that most big trout hook themselves, when you are casting upstream. The weight of the line on the water is generally enough to pull in the hook if it is sharp *and has no barb on it*. Barbless hooks are a fad of mine, which we will discuss later ; we must first land that trout. Nothing else in the world matters until (as I hope) he is safely on the bank.

If you had touch with your fly when he took, I assume that you just stood up, raising the point of your rod steadily (not ' striking '), and the fish did the rest. You dropped the line with your left hand, leaving the line clear and the reel free to spin ; and it did. It screamed as the fish pulled out line against the check. You passed the rod to your left hand, and, the instant that the reel stopped spinning, you got hold of the handle *very* carefully with the right hand and wound in

line, ready to let go instantly if the fish pulled too hard or made another run. If he came downstream you kept below him at all costs, to keep the line just taut. You sprinted down the bank if necessary. If you could not do that, and you could not reel in fast enough, you pulled line in through the rings, holding it in your hand. I once saw a good angler take in line with his hand and his mouth alternately, rather than let it be slack.

I am going to let that fish of yours do plenty of tricks. Those that take most confidently are generally the most difficult to land. He has had a run upstream, making the reel screech. Then he has come downstream at you, and it was all that you could do to keep the line taut, though you kept the top of your rod up all the time. This is a great art, because then the supple rod gives and takes, so that the fish cannot increase the strain on the gut beyond a certain point. When that strain feels too heavy, you just let go the reel-handle and he takes out line. Now you can see him, in the clear water, nearly level with you, swimming upright.

A beauty. Light coloured. Spotted. His head down, and broad strong tail up, trying to bore down into the weeds. The rod will not let him, and you feel that the strain is not too heavy, so you just hold him.

Suddenly he changes his tactics, swings his head round, and bolts downstream about five yards, turns upstream again, and dives deep into a big bed of weeds before you realise what has happened. You want to raise the point again, and pull at him, upstream. Don't. Move down the bank until you are below him, and put the strain on from there. You do that. He will not budge. Hitherto there has been a throbbing of the rod, a *live* strain, which, if you have fishing in your soul, you have felt thrilling all over you. Now the strain is quite dead. The glory has departed. You do not dare to put on any more, for fear of breaking the fine gut. It is as well that you do not. That trout has probably got hold of a strong weed-stem with his mouth, and that stem is securely rooted in the bottom of the river. What is to be done? Well, the best thing to do, in

all emergencies, even in an awful one like this, is to do nothing, but to think.

If it is true—as I firmly believe that it is, from my own experience and that of other people whom I trust—that the fish has hold of a weed with his mouth, what is the best thing to do? Obviously, to make him open his mouth, but how? Stand where you are, well below the weed-bed, lower the point of your rod gradually, winding in line all the time to keep it just taut, until the rod points straight at where you imagine the fish to be. The line then can run freely through the rings. Take hold of it, just above the reel, with your free hand, and give some gentle little tugs, not strong enough to break the fine gut, of course. I have never known a weeded trout to be able to stand those little tugs for long. Soon, it may be after a minute of it, downstream he comes. Up comes the point of the rod again at once, and the glory of the live strain and the thrilling rod returns, this time vastly increased by the contrast with those awful moments of anxiety. But there is plenty of life left in that trout. He is playing too deep for us to see him, and now and then

he gives some horrid, jiggy tugs—probably shaking his head—as hints that he is not yet at the end of his tricks. What will the next one be? We soon know. Another fast run, tearing line from a screeching reel, and at the end of it a leap clear of the water, falling back on it with a slap and a great splash. The rod is just 'curtseyed' for an instant as he does that. Somehow that curtsey seems to happen almost of itself, one is so afraid of that great body hitting the taut gut as it falls. Then, when the point is raised again, will there still be a strain? There is, at least on this occasion, and now we will start putting on all the pressure which we dare to use, in order to tire the fish.

He is well out in the stream now, still swimming upright, but nearer to the surface. The fresh water, running through his gills, keeps him still in full vigour. We keep on a steady pressure, as much as we think that the fine gut will bear. At last we get his head round our way and draw him towards us, keeping low, so that he shall not see us. We succeed in winding in line (rod in left hand, reel-handle in right), then, with the

right hand, we slip the landing-net gently into the water, at a slant with the stream. He comes towards it, head foremost. Will he head into it? Probably not; he is still swimming upright; but sometimes one can save time by landing a fish before he is tired out. We will try if he comes any farther. He does not. He sees the net, and away he goes, out into the stream again with a rush, taking out line. Luckily the hand holding the rod was only jamming the line against it with one finger, and, raising that, let the line run, or he might have broken away. Now we can put all the pressure on that we dare, the little rod bent over in a curve, and we 'give him the butt.' Thus we keep him near the top with his head up, and—at last—we turn his head our way. This time he turns on his side as he comes, and we draw him right over the slanting net, head foremost. The instant that his middle has passed the ring, or extender, of the net we lift it straight up, carry the whole tackle—net, rod, and fish—well back from the water, and lay it all on the ground.

The battle is over. There he is—a brilliant

beauty, broad of back and deep in girth, in splendid condition—out of his element at last. Being so, he will gasp and suffer far more discomfort than he ever did during the great struggle. Spare him that. A sharp little tap with a little leaded stick ('priest') on the top of the head, between the eyes, and he is still at once. We will defer the final rites for our next letter. How are you feeling? I confess that my knees are shaking with the sudden relief from the long anxiety and drawn-out time of suspense. Even though the gut held out, as it did, all sorts of things might have happened, the worst of all being the hook drawing out just as he was coming, exhausted, into the net, after we had seen him so close and judged his size and condition.

VI

A FIRST DRY-FLY DAY—*Concluded*

AFTER writing my last letter to you I picked up an edition of the *Compleat Angler* containing the second part, which was written by Charles Cotton and dedicated to his friend Izaak Walton in 1676. I came across this :

> PISCATOR : Look you, sir, here is a fine stream now : you have length enough, stand a little further off, let me entreat you, and do but fish this stream like an artist, and peradventure a good fish may fall to your share. How now ? What ! is all gone ?
>
> VIATOR : No, I but touched him ; but that was a fish worth taking.
>
> PISCATOR : Why, now let me tell you, you lost that fish by your own fault, and through your own eagerness and haste ; for you are never to offer to strike a good

fish if he do not strike himself, till first you see him turn his head after he has taken your fly, and then you can never strain your tackle in the striking, if you strike with any manner of moderation.

The edition of Walton's classic which I generally have by me does not contain Charles Cotton's second part, and over thirty years must have passed since I read that bit of wisdom. It is interesting to compare it with what I wrote in my last letter. Instead of our fine gut, Viator was using two strands of horsehair as a point, and when he 'struck' he only felt a touch. I know that 'touch,' followed by the cast coming back, without a fly at the end. Now that you have started on the right lines, I hope that you never will! Viator's line was all of horsehair, tapered from seven strands or more down to the two of the point, and its length was 'longer by a yard and a half, or sometimes two yards' than his rod. How long was that? Between fifteen and eighteen feet! ('one of five or six yards long is commonly enough'). No wonder that the horsehair point broke if

he 'struck' with such tackle, and no wonder that he could only fish down-wind. 'As the river winds you will be forced to angle up and down by turns accordingly; . . . endeavour as much as you can to have the wind evermore on your back.'

I do not know how you think about all this. To me it is pleasant and soothing to bridge over the intervening generations, to think of those seventeenth-century anglers, and of all the interests that we have in common with them; even as it is pleasing, in the same way, to bridge over the Atlantic and to think of American anglers of the same stock, with the same traditions in their hearts, from one of whom, by the way, I learned to use barbless hooks, about which more anon. Old Izaak Walton himself has been very real to me since I discovered that, at the mature age of sixty-five, he scratched his initials upon a marble memorial in Westminster Abbey. He ought to have known better at that age, of course, but those whom the gods love are young when they die (as the saying ought to go), and about two centuries later his offence was condoned by

DRY-FLY WATER

[p. 52

a great divine, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, who was Dean of Westminster when I was at school there. The old man was reading late in his study one night, when he came across Izaak Walton's confession of his bit of vandalism. Lighting a candle, he sallied at once through the private door from the deanery into the vast echoing emptiness of the dark Abbey. There he discovered that the record was indeed true. The characters, *I.W.* 1658, showed clearly, scratched upon the marble. The other day I seized an opportunity (when nobody was looking) to take a pencil rubbing of that memento of our revered father in the art of angling, and of outlook upon life. Here it is, reproduced the exact size (see Diagram 16 overpage).

I hope that you do not mind this little digression? I have put it into this letter on purpose, to steady our minds for more stalking of trout after the wild excitement of our struggle with the last one, which now lies in the landing net on the rich water-meadow grass. Let us get back to him. Unhook the little fly which led to his disaster, and note that the needle-pointed hook,

without a barb, has pierced the horny substance which surrounds his mouth. There being no barb, the hook comes out easily when you *push* it. Take note of that point,

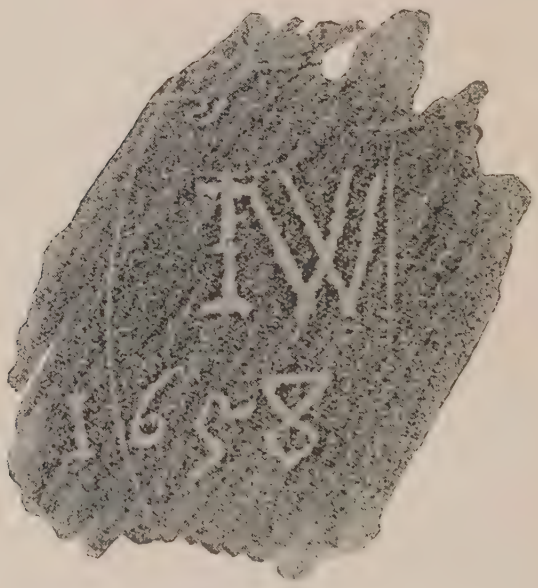

Diagram 16.

in case anyone should try to persuade you that it is easier for a trout to shake out a barbless hook when you fail to keep the

line quite taut in playing him. How can a slack line *push* out a hook? I used to lose many fish because I did not dare to put on enough pressure to send the barb home at once, when fishing for big trout with fine gut. Then again, if the barb was well home, and the fish a small one that ought to go back to the water uninjured, the barb was a great nuisance, causing delay in unhooking that was sometimes fatal. At first I used to file off the barbs, but this is an awkward business. Then I tried to get tackle-makers to supply me with flies tied on hooks without any barbs. I could get no response, until at last I persuaded Messrs. Ogden Smith, of St. James's Street, London, to supply the need, and thus to add greatly to my comfort. I can now face with equanimity even such an exasperating occurrence as catching up a fly in some part of my clothes, in the middle of my back, for instance—such things will happen, especially in a strong wind—when I am stalking a large trout.

That hook, barbed or barbless, is now out of the trout's mouth, and you will want to know what he weighs as soon as possible

(he loses a little weight by the time when you get him home). We had better not leave the rod lying about in the grass, likely to be trod upon, with the fly loose, likely to catch in anything. If the rod has a spike in the butt (a very useful appendage if not heavy enough to spoil the balance), stick it upright in the ground; if not, prop it up against something, and in either case pass the gut round under the reel and hook the fly in one of the rings that the line passes through, as it was when we started. (Page 24.)

Now we can weigh the fish, with a spring balance. The best place for the large hook on it is through the fish's gill, not in his mouth. What does he weigh? Say about 1¾ lb. He fought hard, and I think that chalk-stream trout of about that weight generally fight the hardest. The bigger ones, of 2 lb. and over, just trust to their weight and pull, as a rule. Whatever weight he is, he is a beauty when he comes out of the water, but he soon loses his brilliance. If you want to preserve that, wrap him up in newspaper. Some people prefer nettles, but newspapers have less sting (if you choose

yours carefully). Put a little grass, or a dock-leaf, or nettles if you like them, at the bottom of the basket or bag; pick up the rod; hitch the landing-net on to you, by whatever method of slinging you may have chosen, and let us get back to the business of the day. But one moment. Have a look at the gut-point, to make sure that it was not injured in that battle. It was. Being of 'drawn' gut it has become badly frayed. I have some spare points handy, wrapped in a damp bit of flannel in an old tobacco-pouch, which keeps my pocket dry, and I recommend you to have the same.

We have now used everything that we are likely to want in the way of equipment for a day with the dry-fly, so we may as well make a list of them, for future use. Rod, Reel, Line, Casts, Point, Flies (in any little old tin, but it is a great comfort to have one of those pocket-cases, supplied by tackle-makers, with little compartments to keep the different sorts of flies separate). Tin of grease for line (I use Hardy's 'Ceroline' or Ogden Smith's 'Mucilin' myself, if I have one of them by me. Otherwise I use equal

parts of vaseline and candle-wax, melted together and cooled into a cake). Bit of chamois leather to put the grease on with. Little bottle, with brush in cork, with paraffin for fly. Old tobacco-pouch, with bit of damp flannel, for spare gut-points or casts. Scissors (or special cutter, with tweezers to pick up flies) to cut gut. Landing-net, with some attachment to keep it handy when wanted. 'Priest,' to use as described; spring balance, to weigh fish. Basket or bag, with shoulder-strap, to carry fish. An absent-minded old Professor, fond of a day's fishing, once made out a list on those lines, and made a note at the end 'Kiss wife.' As you have not got one you will probably think that a sloppy idea, but it may come in useful in later life. And now let us go on with our day's sport with the dry-fly. It would take a whole book to describe that experience in detail. Let us imagine a few typical rises of fish that we cannot deal with without knowing more than was required to delude and to land our first one. The basket feels better with his weight in it, and we have something to encourage us for the

remainder of the day. I always think that the heavier the basket or bag, the easier it is to carry on a homeward journey.

The next fish is going to give us more trouble. He is rising under the opposite bank. He cannot see us at this angle, so we can stand up. Beyond a certain circle, on the surface of the water above him, he only sees the reflection of the bottom of the stream, say in the part of the surface beyond A and B in this sketch, which I have tried not to make too much like a proposition in Euclid. (F is the fish) :

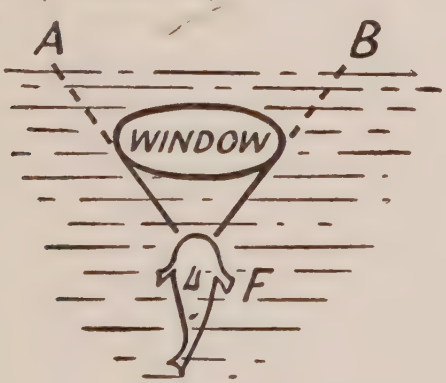

DIAGRAM 17.

Dr. Ward, in his *Animal Life Under Water*, calls that circle on the surface the trout's ' window.'

Now cast the fly across, and drop it, if you can, about six inches to a foot upstream, above the fish. This needs a fairly long line, so it is well to remember to lift *upwards* when recovering the line, and not to let the butt of the rod go back beyond the perpendicular. We went into that before, but now we find out its importance. If the tip of the rod goes back too far, the fly comes low behind you, and catches in things growing in the meadow. You manage to get out a straight line, dropping the fly in the right place. Now watch it. It goes downstream, till within an ace of the spot where the trout rose. Then, just at the moment when we expect the fish to take, the fly comes tearing across the river towards us, leaving a wake behind it which will probably scare that trout for about an hour, if not more, if he is a timid one, and not very hungry. What happened? The stream between us and the fly worked on the straight line floating on its surface, drove it down in a curve, making it pull the fly in that horrible way. You are now up against the main problem of the dry-fly, how to avoid that 'drag.' It always

happens if the stream runs more strongly where the line is floating than it does at the fly end of the gut. For that reason a straight line (about which we read so much) is nearly always fatal in dry-fly fishing. The line should not straighten out until the fly has floated past the fish, if there is any danger of ' drag.'

Let us assume that this particular fish is both hungry and lacking in guile, and that he is rising again already. If we try again from here, we must cast so that the fly shall pass him with the line slack, but just on the point of tightening. A little sideways wriggle with the wrist as the line goes forward achieves that, but it needs practice, so let us cross over at the hatch where we started, and come up the other bank. Now, if you can cast with your left hand, the problem is easy, the same as it was with the first fish. If not, you must either cast back-handed with your right hand (an awkward business), or try the ' overland ' cast, which means simply casting your line out over the meadow, so that the cast falls over into the river, and the fly drops a few inches above the rising fish.

But what happens if he does not take, the first time it drifts down? How are you going to recover your fly, to make the next cast? It may catch in a daisy, or a dandelion, or something.

Before I learnt better, it used to do that with me constantly. When it did, I used to break away by hand-lining, repair my tackle, put on another fly, and try again. When I had either caught the fish, or frightened him, I used to collect the lost flies off the daisies or other obstructions. Once I had to break seven times, and only found three of my flies and gut-points in the grass. You will be spared that, because you began casting into gooseberry bushes, and such-like things, on purpose to learn how to avoid a hang-up with this overland cast.

We will not go into detail about the hooking and the landing (or losing) all the fish that we try for on this first dry-fly day, but before we end it we have one or two more difficulties to face. The stream meanders about, and for a time we have to cast against the wind. I wish that I could put you on a royal road to learning that trick. To some anglers it

seems to come at once. To others never. My own dodge is to bring the rod back with my finger-nails upwards, and forward with my knuckles upwards, taking infinite care not to use force, but to let the rod do the work, and I finish with a straight arm, and the rod-tip nearly touching the water. I only hope that this idea may be of some help to you. Above all, do not use too long a gut cast against the wind, or too long a 'point' of fine gut. It is exasperating, when all goes well until the fly is just dropping above the fish, if the wind then throws it back, and the tackle falls in a coil on the water. If constant practice in throwing against the wind saves you from that experience, then your trouble will be well repaid. Let me repeat, *no force.*

Some find the 'underhand' cast useful against a wind. However that may be, it is essential to use it if you want to put a fly to a fish taking under an overhanging bough, or under a bridge. With this method you use the rod exactly as you do in the overhand cast, but you swish it to and fro horizontally over the water, instead of vertically over your head. It is well, however, to keep the

fly moving rather faster in the air than you do in overhand casting, or it may get too low and touch the water. The usual tendency is to bring the fly back under the rod, and forward over it. If you can manage to bring the fly back *over* the rod, and forward *under* it, you will find that you can throw it much farther under an obstruction.

We will rest a little now. I am going to allow you beginner's luck, three brace of big trout in good condition in your basket, and not too many disasters with others. Several landed and put back as too small to keep, and just a few words about these. Never handle them. They will not be any the worse for their experience if you leave them in the wet landing-net, disengage the hook gently (you can do that easily if it has no barb), put the net back into running water, and let the fish swim out. If you hold them in a hot hand, squeezing them, after a struggle in the playing, they may not survive.

With no such crimes on our consciences, and trout ceasing to rise, we can be content, and revel in our surroundings. There is fresh life everywhere. We get a general

impression of the beauty of blossom, and of the song of birds. Then we wend our way homeward, across water-meadows blazing with marsh-marigolds, and thence by a country lane where orange-tip butterflies flit along the hedgerows, till we pass the cottage gardens, redolent with the scent of lilac, wallflower, and narcissus, which mark the approach to the village where we have our quarters.

VII

SOME FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE DRY-FLY

REFLECTION is a good word. I like it better than contemplation, as applied to our attitude as anglers, in spite of that 'contemplative man's recreation' on the title-page of the *Compleat Angler*. 'Contemplative' describes better the attitude of those peaceful cows that were chewing the cud as they observed us in that water-meadow on our first angling morning. They did not seem to be reflecting, as most anglers would, about the beauty of their surroundings in spring-time in a chalk-stream valley. Shall we now finish off our imaginary day there in May or June? As there is no evening rise so early in the year in those parts, I imagine that when we went home we lingered over a good tea of scones, butter, and jam—all home-made. Perhaps we had a new-laid egg therewith,

if we were hungry. Then we lighted pipes (at least I did) and strolled about the lanes, reflecting upon our day's sport and the promise of the morrow ; until the soft fluttering of bats in the dusk replaced the swift flight of the swallows and martins, and the music of song-birds changed to sleepy chucklings as they retired to roost in the foliage. Then we supped, talked about angling, nature-study, and such-like topics, till we retired to rest between lavender-scented linen. We slept well. Just before sunrise we were awakened by the twittering of birds, and then we turned over for a final sleep, with a feeling of contentment in the knowledge of the dawn of another angling day. That is what I have imagined, and now for one amongst many reflections.

Not long ago I visited a little country inn in the valley of a Hampshire chalk-stream, where anglers of note used to resort in the days, now long past, when I caught my first trout with a dry-fly in that water. Instead of the old inn, with trellis porch over which roses and honeysuckle climbed, I found a new one, of red brick. The rooms were more

comfortable and larger, it is true, than those of old, the tea equally good. Better than all, I found one of the old record-books of past fishing to read, recalling remembrances of happy holidays with boon companions. The names of the old generation of anglers had gradually disappeared, being replaced by others, who, I was told, do not spend their nights in the country after a day's fishing. They motor down in time for the rise, and motor away as soon as it is over, on business or 'pleasure' bent. Is that wise? Perhaps it may be unavoidable, in these days of speeding-up movement, but speeding up angling does seem to take away much of its charm. However that may be, I think that you will hold that, by putting up in this old English village, we have chosen the better part, and I, for one, am grateful to the author[1] who thus put our thoughts into words:

> 'The cities make people think like men who have fallen sick and are lying in bed with fever. Only on farms or deep in the

[1] Ernest Poole, *Russian Impressions*, 'The Village.'

forest, or out on the river while you fish, can you think a thing out clearly. For there your life goes quietly, and you learn only what is worth while.'

It would be pleasant to remain with you for some more days with the dry-fly on a chalk-stream in May or June, but now let us imagine that we have come to the same water later in the season, in July or in August. The weather, we will say, is much hotter. Trees and shrubs are in abundant leaf. Excepting for vivid green there is less colour in the water-meadows, the glory of the marsh-marigolds has departed; but there is a spangling of wild flowers to be found if you look for them, and great clumps of purple loosestrife and of willowherb near the river-bank. There is plenty of bird-life about, but little melody. One thing we recognise as unchanging, the crystal flow of the chalk-stream water in the main stream and in its many feeders and irrigating channels in the meadows. The water-weeds have grown, some being in flower, and so have the reeds and sedges which mark the lines of the

banks. The sun is higher in the heavens, and gives a whiter light. And the trout?

We must stalk them, now, and we are in for a desperately exciting experience. A few will perhaps be rising here and there in the ordinary way, and to them we will apply the methods that we used in May and June, but these rises will be few and far between, so let us go in search of the trout themselves. We will begin at the bottom (downstream) end of our fishing, as before, and go stalking up the bank, keeping as low as we can, scanning the clear water carefully as we go. The same old rule applies now, as always. If you spot a trout before he sees you, you may catch him. If he spots you first, he wins the trick. If you move cautiously, you have a good chance of seeing him first, because he cannot see straight behind him—his body and back are between you and his eyes. He can see an object behind him if it is fairly high in the air, so remember about that rod-point, and keep it low or behind you, as you did when you walked through a copse on your visit to the river. Let us keep still, and crouch down. There is a fish,

STALKING WITH THE DRY-FLY

[p. 70

a dark-coloured one, on that patch of gravel below the next weed-bed. Have you spotted him? Then let us watch him for a minute. No use, I am afraid, he is right on the bottom, apparently quite still, only his tail moving gently. Sometimes one can tease a fish like that into rising by much perseverance in casting over him, but it is a long business, and not worth the delay, with better chances ahead. Keep out of sight of him, if possible, lest he wakes up, sees us, and careers upstream to frighten others.

Next we spot a light-coloured one, near the surface, well camouflaged, but just showing against some weed. He looks quite different from the last one. Alert, constantly on the move, and obviously on the lookout for floating food. He comes up to inspect something on the surface, and goes back, disappointed. He is well worth trying for. The fly goes over him and comes floating down, about a foot to one side of him. Not a very good shot, but we leave the fly on the water as long as we think that he can see it. Just after it has passed him he comes across, follows it close for about a foot, until

we fear that he will see the rod, but he opens a large pink mouth, and is just going to shut it on the fly when up goes the point of the rod, apparently of its own accord, pulls the fly out of that open mouth, and away goes a scared fish into a bed of weeds. At least that is what has happened with me, time after time, and does with all anglers until they learn old Charles Cotton's lesson, told on the banks of the Dove two centuries and a half ago: 'You are never to offer to strike a good fish . . . till first you see him turn his head after he has taken your fly.' But it is a difficult lesson to learn, and one easily forgotten. Never mind. There are more good fish ahead, and so we go on with our stalking, gaining experience as we go, and learning new lessons every time that we fish for trout with a fly, however long we may live.

So the long summer's day passes, stalking one trout here and another there. Hooking and landing some, let us hope, and marvelling to find, later on, other feeding trout in many of the spots from which we have captured their brethren. This is a common experience

in well-stocked water. Another point we notice. Certain of the feeding trout, sometimes nearly all of them, are not taking floating food, but something below the surface, probably 'nymph,' an earlier stage of development of the winged insect. It is well to have some imitations of these with you. But how can one induce them to sink at the end of a greased line and floating gut? And, by the way, is this 'dry-fly' fishing? To be quite candid, it is not; but it is an art now practised by most dry-fly anglers under such conditions. The best way to cause a counterfeit of a nymph to sink quickly is to anoint it with glycerine, instead of with paraffin, and to do the same to a few inches of the gut-point above it. If you can see your fish, as we have been doing, you can tell when he takes, and tighten the line accordingly. If you cannot see the fish, but know where he is, the best that you can do is to watch the floating part of the cast of gut on the water (if your eyesight is good enough to see it), and to tighten up when you see it go under.

The day has been hot, let us say. Stalking

has been strenuous work, and, although we rested awhile and partook of sandwiches, kept cool and fresh between leaves of lettuce, it would be well to reserve some of our energy for the evening rise. It is likely to be a good one, in such windless weather, and the biggest trout will then be on the move. Most of them have been in shady shelters throughout the day. Let us go to our own shelter for a while. Tea will revive us, and this time a special one, with two poached eggs each, as we know not when we may sup ; then we can sally forth refreshed, ready for whatever may befall.

If my experience holds good (you never know for certain), the trout, even those which were most confident earlier in the day, will be very wary and shy of gut in the late afternoon and early evening, until the sun sinks behind the outline of the downlands. Do not let us wait for that moment, or we shall miss the beauties of evening in a chalk-stream valley. The refreshment of the cooler air ; shadows lengthening in the golden light ; the cawing of rooks in the elm-trees ; the stems of beech-trees, silhouetted against the

deepening glow of a sunset sky, which illuminates clouds of insects dancing in the air above the gently gliding surface of the stream. Many of them are 'spinners,' the imago or final stage of some of the winged flies that have brought the trout to the surface during the day. Showers of them fall upon the water. Here is Charles Kingsley's story of their life-history, which makes good reading. It comes in the *Water-Babies*, the bit about the fly that alighted on Tom's knee, and suddenly

'Turned quite pale, and then quite white. "Why, you're ill!" said Tom. But he did not answer. "You're dead," said Tom, looking at him as he stood on his knee white as a ghost. "No, I ain't!" answered a little squeaking voice over his head. "This is me up here, in my ball-dress, and that's my skin. Ha! Ha! you could not do such a trick as that!"

'And no more Tom could, nor Houdin, nor Robin, nor Frikell, nor all the conjurers in the world. For the little rogue had jumped clean out of his own skin, and

left it standing on Tom's knee, eyes, wings, legs, tail, exactly as if it had been alive . . . and what was the oddest of all, the whisks at the end of his tail had grown five times as long as they were before. . . . He danced up and down . . . till he grew so tired that he tumbled into the water, and floated down. But what became of him Tom never knew, and he himself never minded, for Tom heard him singing to the last, as he floated away,

'To drive dull care away—ay—ay!'

And if he did not care, why nobody else cared either.'

But we do. On many evenings I have known big trout prefer 'spinners' to any other form of floating fly, so it is well if we have some with us. Soon, if we are lucky, we see great dark noses come up to take them, and, as the light fades away, the large moths and sedge-flies that flutter from the banks. The golden gleam upon the water hides the fish themselves from us now, but this does not matter when we can place them by their rises.

THE AFTERGLOW [*p.* 76

There I part from you, thinking (it may be wrongly) that you have an easy task in hand, and leaving with you the advice to devote special attention to rises near the bank. They probably mark the biggest fish, and usually the most confident. Bats are now in evidence, and the velvety darkness of a summer's night will soon descend upon the scene. If, by that time, you have a brace of good fish to your credit, be content. A time comes when you can no longer see to thread gut through the eye of a fly. Holding it up against the after-glow of the sunset in the sky will make the operation easier. When it is difficult, even with that aid, you will not be able to see your fly on the water, and it is high time to stop. And so we take leave, for the time being, of these dry-fly delights. I wish you, what you are sure to have, a peaceful sleep between those lavender-scented sheets.

VIII

A DISCUSSION ON FLIES, AND OTHER MATTERS

We touched once upon the treatment of dry-fly fishing as a science. We did not follow up that idea, but we might do so now. Kingsley's story in our last letter about the marvel of the fly that turned itself into a spinner leads us up to the idea of the scientific study of making artificial flies as exact copies of the real insects upon which trout feed at different times. This leads to all sorts of thoughts about colour, form, size, and movement. To me the last seems most important of all. I have often thought that a trout which rejects the idea of taking a fly after a close inspection (keeping the angler on tenterhooks) decides to leave the fly alone because there is some 'drag' on it, causing it to move in an unnatural way. Following up that notion, I suggested once to anglers who use 'nymphs,' causing them to sink

by glycerine or other devices, that they would do better if they tried to copy the movement of real nymphs, which lie on the bottom until ready to turn into winged flies, and then move *upwards* towards the surface. A little touch of some chemical which would make a bubble of gas when wet might cause an artificial nymph to do this. So far, I have not heard of anyone trying this trick to deceive trout, and I do not know enough about chemistry to try it myself, so let us pass from the movement idea to that of imitating exactly the colour, form, and size of real water-insects.

An admirable fly-fisher and good sportsman of my acquaintance always insists upon knowing why trout take each sort of artificial fly. He will not use a stock pattern, although it may be most successful, unless he knows exactly what the fish imagine it to be. If such standards are applied to fly-fishing, it certainly becomes a science, or, rather, several. It includes entomology, as affecting every insect likely to come within view of a trout, and the many other 'ologies,' which apply to the composition and temperature of water,

to the vegetation in and near rivers and streams, and to the life-history of the trout therein; the why and wherefore of their procedure under different conditions of weather, of period of the year, and of time of day. Another fly-fishing friend is careful, when he visits an unknown stream, to make enquiries about the pattern of fly most popular with local anglers, with a view to using it. Another makes the same enquiries, and sedulously avoids the local patterns. He holds that trout know them too well, and he is not likely to alter his opinion, because his method succeeds. That may be accounted for by his great skill in casting a fly, but there is no end to such problems, in our present stage of knowledge. Only a few days ago I heard from a credible witness of two anglers who had been discussing this question of exact imitations of the fly on the water. Trout were rising well, some little way below a bridge. The disputants decided to try the experiment of dropping from the bridge a pattern of each artificial fly that they had with them. The trout took them all, indiscriminately.

I do not want, by this or by other tales, to convert you to any particular way of thinking about the importance or otherwise of trying to copy exactly the fly on the water. If you mean to do that—and decide to tie your own flies, which adds greatly to the pleasure of fly-fishing, for those who have time for it—think things out for yourself. Then the first point that strikes you will probably be that it matters not at all what the fly looks like to you. What matters is its appearance to the trout, who sees it above him as a silhouette against the sky if you are fishing dry or near the surface, or sideways if you are fishing deep. You will probably ask what I do myself, about choosing the fly to use. Having no time to study fly-fishing as a science, with all the fascinating branches of nature-study that it opens up, I envy and revere those who have had the time, and have passed on their learning to others in the numerous books on the subject. For myself, I have treated fly-fishing not as a science, but as a sport for seldom-earned leisure, in a lifetime of hard work. I use very few patterns of flies, choosing those

which I have found most successful, and disregarding altogether the fly on the water. I make one exception, when the trout are actually seen to be taking large May-fly. Then I use smaller ones, delicately tied, of the flat-winged pattern (Ogden Smith's 'Guys'). For the rest, I really think that you had better experiment, and come to your own conclusions.

Every year brings out new ideas, and the use of new materials to give artificial flies a more natural appearance when seen against the light. I am very fond, myself, of flies called 'variants,' with long, dark, smoky grey hackles, that stand out in a bristly way, and small grey wings pointing *forward*; and I like them with gold-tinsel bodies, which reflect the colour of their surroundings and convey the appearance of transparency. I believe that the tackle-makers call this pattern the 'Southcote.' I have them tied on barbless hooks, of size 00. That is the smallest hook that I ever use. The 000 size may raise more fish, but it seems to me to hook fewer, and to lose more of those that are hooked. Other favourites are the red quill

(size 00), the olive quill (size 0 or 1), the 'tup' (size 00), and (in wet weather) a hare's ear and gold (size 0), without wings, and with very little hackle. Also a large sedge-fly, for occasional use in the evening. From July onwards I find a pale-bodied fly (size 00), that *keeps pale and greenish when oiled* (like the Whitchurch), is generally popular with trout, and a 'pink Wickham' (size 0) seems to beat most others in the evening, unless the fish are after little spinners, which are useful. But, as I say, everyone has his own views, and I hope that you will form yours by experience. Success with any fly is said to make one take more care in casting it, and therefore to increase one's success with it.

So much for flies. What shall we discuss next? While we are on the subject of science I hope that you will forgive a little digression about nature-study for anglers. Dry-fly fishers are sometimes chaffed about it, and told that they think more about their surroundings than they do about their fishing. I cannot say what others do, but I know that, when good trout are rising, I think

about them and about nothing else. When they are not rising, it is pleasant to ponder upon all sorts of things, nature-study amongst them, even the scientific side of it, and the wonders that go far beyond the reach of science. Take anything in nature that you like. Let us say the stalk of a common dandelion, as I have just been fighting a hopeless battle against them on my lawn. What, or who, has taught those dandelion-stalks their tricks? Have you ever noticed that they stiffen themselves, to hold the flaunting flower up, until a bee visits it; that they then slacken themselves to lie down flat, and so hide the flower in the grass until the seeds with their little feathery attachments have formed; and that they then stiffen themselves again, to hold the crown of hundreds of seeds up until the wind blows them all over the place to defeat you by starting hundreds more dandelions? How do they do that stiffening and slackening trick?

That, of course, is only one small example of the countless wonders in nature-study, but it happens to be the one that reconciled me to taking an interest in botany after

having been put off it in my youth by the long words of the text-books. I once asked an eminent botanist how dandelion-stalks did their trick. He answered that he did not know that they did it, so I inferred science does not carry one very far, when one comes to living things. Nature-study, with or without it, does give a sense of proportion, and prevent one's becoming a 'Jimmy-know-all,' as such folk were called in the navy in my youth. Whether through nature-study or otherwise, I never knew an angler to deserve that description.

Let us get back to the actual fishing, whether we look upon it as an art, a sport, a science, a recreation, or a philosophy. I wonder whether I have been wrong in my ideas of how best to write to those who are starting upon what I hope will be a long experience of the joys that come into the life of an angler. Have I, I wonder, made things seem too easy? There has been so much in our favour, and nothing of strenuous days battling with the worst of weather, with the trout indifferent to all persuasion. I shall let it stand. It is based upon my

actual memories, with perhaps some touch of beginner's luck, which came to me, as I hope that it may come to you. I have described that elsewhere,[1] and I must forgo the pleasures of repetition which come with advancing years, but there is one quality which I do not want to wish for you, the quality of patience, with which anglers are so often credited by those to whom fly-fishing is a sealed book.

'Patience' does not describe the delirium of expectation which sustains the energies of a true angler throughout the long hours of a spring or summer day, be the conditions never so adverse. Persistence is a word that serves the purpose better, and this applies to all fly-fishing, dry or wet, for trout or for salmon, in soft or in stern surroundings. Writing those words has brought back a memory of plodding with a revered companion through many weary miles of deep snow, to reach the only good pool, not frozen over, in a first-class salmon-river in early spring. But we have not reached salmon-fishing yet, so that story must be deferred.

[1] 'My First Trout,' *Mostly About Trout*, Allen & Unwin.

IX

WET-FLY FISHING FOR TROUT

'I CANNOT say,' writes Mr. R. C. Bridgett in his book on loch-fishing, 'whether the floating fly or the wet-fly is the better, both seem to do equally well, but the "rug" to a sunk fly on a dark night is something really worth knowing, a sensation that is not beaten by anything in fishing.' Those are good words, especially 'rug' which is what the immortal Alice would call a portmanteau-word, compounded of 'thrill' and 'tug.' I know nothing of night-fishing, there having been a convention, upon the water which I have had the good luck to fish with a fly, that the angler's activities shall cease when night begins, but that word 'rug' sums up in a monosyllable the whole of the delight and unexpectedness of the most exciting moment in fishing for unseen trout below the surface of stream or loch with a wet-fly. One

feels it in one's wrist, and thence up the arm into one's whole being. For 'unseen' trout, perhaps I ought to have written 'unlocated,' because when writing of dry-fly fishing I included fishing with the line and most of the gut floating, but the 'fly' or nymph sunk, for trout located either by seeing their rises or by actually viewing the fish.

Mystery about the presence or absence of fish in the water in which one's flies are working form the great excitement of wet-fly fishing. You have probably heard such fishing referred to as the 'chuck-and-chance-it' style. I have often wondered who could have invented that foolish phrase. My own idea is that you need more knowledge of the habits of trout to take them in any number from waters where you do not see them, than from waters in which you can actually observe the fish, or see their rises. In wet-fly fishing you have to make your own deductions about what is below from the appearance of the surface of the running water, and I cannot imagine a more attractive pursuit, combined, as it is, with the joy which we all get from the running water itself.

Let us get the setting for the sport. For that we can go to nearly all parts of the British Isles. We will go this time to Devon, in March or early in April, to meet that annual wonder which gives us more joy with every year of life, the coming of the early spring. Let our route to the fishing pass down a Devonshire lane bordered by high banks of rich red soil, with wild flowers on them, blossoming between little trickles of sparkling water that turns bright red when it mingles with the soil of the gutters beside the road. Most of the flowers will be yellow, this time of the year, the pale yellow of primroses, the cadmium yellow of celandines and perhaps of silver-weed in the more marshy spots; but there will be violets too, perhaps a few white ones amongst them, and delicate wood anemones. We shall probably see a few hibernating butterflies, brimstones and small tortoiseshells, awakened by the sunshine, and bees will be busy in the flowers.

It may be that, over the tree-tops on a hill near the river-valley, we may get a view of buzzards, wheeling and turning in their graceful soaring flight. The occasional song

of thrushes, perhaps of blackbirds, will be in the air, and now and then the notes of robins and of wrens. The strident cries of green woodpeckers will sound amongst the trees. From the lane we turn downhill by a footpath through a wood, where the ground is spangled with primroses, and we hear, close to us, a little rill of clear water which has cut a deep channel in the leaf-mould. It is soon joined by others, and it becomes a brook, babbling on its way to a dam. Thence it runs over the water-wheel of a miniature mill, near a little creeper-clad farm-house with a patch of garden, gay with polyanthus and other early flowers. We will stop there for a while, to put up our tackle. We had most of that in our first letter.

I recommended a 'parallel' cast of gut, of the same thickness throughout, for wet-fly fishing, because with a tapered cast the thicker parts are too near the dropper flies, and easily seen. You will want a different line for wet-fly, because the one that we used for dry-fly, if it is a good one, will float on the top of the water, and so be more conspicuous. This does not matter with

dry-fly, as the fish should not see the line at all when we use that method. I prefer for wet-fly a parallel line, not too stout, but heavy for its thickness. It is well to consult the rod-maker about the most suitable pattern. I imagine that the rod is now up, the reel attached, and the line threaded through the rings. The cast of gut has been lying in the water (with a piece of paper attached to mark where it is) while we have been dealing with rod, reel, and line, and putting on waders. These last will be useful, as in wet-fly fishing it is always as well to get into the water (if you do not thereby interfere with other folks' sport). The lower you are the better you are hidden from the trout. In places where the river is too deep to wade, you must of course do the best that you can to keep concealed on the bank. In my own young days I used to think waders coddling, and I stood for hours in the water without them, sometimes in snow-storms. Nowadays I wish that I had been wiser.

You will want to know about the flies. Some anglers, and I think that they are right, maintain that for wet-fly fishing it is

better to have your flies tied on gut, because then they swim more naturally in the water. Against that there is the objection that, when flies are tied on gut, you constantly have to replace your stock when the gut grows old, and this is expensive. For that reason I use eyed flies, and I prefer them with their eyes turned downwards for wet-fly, though I like them the other way for dry-fly. I use three flies, and have them about three feet apart. In order to attach the dropper flies neatly I usually cut the cast at a knot. If the dropper-fly is on gut I join the cast together and fix the fly on like this:

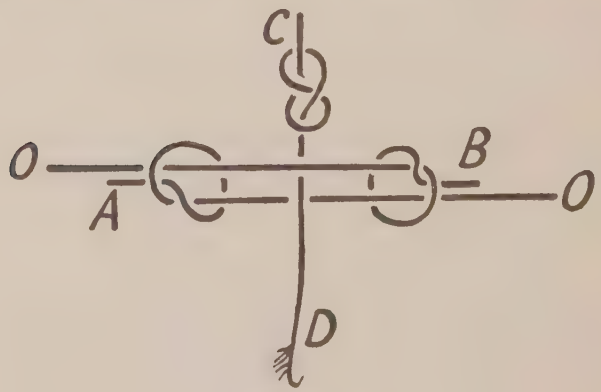

Diagram 18.

Pull the ends A, B, C, to jam the knots. Then pull at 00 to jam A and B together. Then pull D.

If you are afraid that C will pull through, make things sure by a half-hitch round the cast, like this:

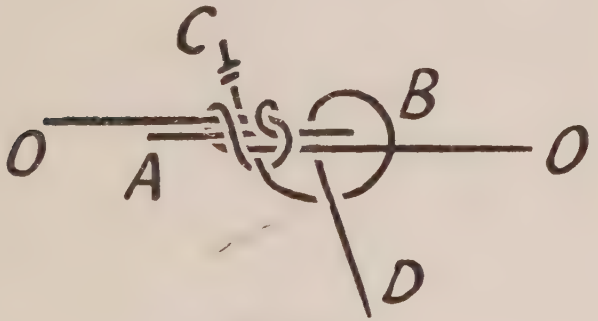

Diagram 19.

With eyed flies, I use a different method of fastening the cast together. For this see our first letter (Diagram 4) and imagine the end B cut off short, and the end A about three inches long, left hanging free. We will imagine that our soaked cast has two little ends of gut like that, about three feet apart, the lower is the same distance from the point. We can now fasten the gut cast to the line

(second letter, Diagrams 6 and 7), and the three flies to the gut (Diagrams 1–3, 18 and 19). What shall those flies be? Say a March brown, a blue upright or 'Greenwell's Glory,' and a small spider of any colour you like, to start with, all as skimpily dressed as possible. Change them if you lose confidence in them, remembering that trout take better at certain times of the day, varying with the season than at other times.

Now we are ready to follow the path and the streamlet down to the river, which is quite close. Soon the gleam of it appears through the trees. We disturb a poacher, a heron fishing in the shallows, and he goes away with slow strokes of his great pinions and soars out of sight, to poach someone else's water. A blackbird scuttles out of some undergrowth, sounding his screaming chuckle of alarm. Then a metallic flash of dazzling blue passes over the water; a kingfisher, another poacher, but such a joy to the sight that we gain more than we lose by his existence. Of the beautiful much is forgiven.

And now for the surroundings of the Devon river which we are to fish, as we come upon

it when we emerge from the wood. Across a broad valley is a range of low hills, clothed with woodlands and surmounted by a soft ragged outline of tree-tops. Here and there we note patches of cultivation, of newly ploughed, bright red earth, its colour softened by distance; in the foreground lies a wide expanse of rich green turf, nibbled by sheep or by sleek red cattle. An occasional oak-tree grows near the river-bank, and in its dappled shade, or in the sunshine on the bank itself, there are wild daffodils, of the short-stalked kind, with greenish yellow cases to the nodding flowers, stirring in the breeze. The whole under a soft sky, with dappled clouds and films of drifting mist. Between the river-banks we find what we have come far to see, the pale grey surface of running water, with its magic of peace that, according to old tradition, no black magic can cross. Having absorbed these surroundings, let us get to business.

In which direction shall we fish? Up-stream or down? And how shall we cast our flies? On that last question there is little more to be said. We had as much of

it as can be told by writing in our letters on the dry-fly. The only points to be added are that we must try to keep the rod out of sight of the trout, and that (of course) there is no need to flick the flies about in the air to dry them, since we mean to fish them wet ; that we must remember to aim them at a level about a foot or a little less above that of the water, so that they, and the gut cast and the line behind them, shall drop as lightly as possible. With the dry-fly, as we saw, it is seldom good to lay a straight line on the water, for fear that the fly should at once begin to ' drag.' With wet flies, below the surface at the end of the cast, we are faced with a different proposition. We want a tighter line to enable us to hook fish which we cannot see, or to help them to achieve their laudable purpose of hooking themselves.

With those points noted, and remembering always to keep yourself and your rod concealed from the trout, which shall it be, upstream or downstream, for our day's fishing ? With the confidence of the folk who rush in where angels fear to tread, I reply

without hesitation, "Both up and down," on an occasion such as this. We want all the fishing that is possible. We arrived at the river at the point nearest to our sleeping-quarters; we can go for miles in either direction and tea will be ready, to refresh us for our homeward walk, at the small farm by the water-mill, which we passed on our way to the river. It is only fair, though, first to study the advice of that early Victorian expert, W. C. Stewart, whose book *The Practical Angler* (1857), is still a classic authority on wet-fly fishing. He gave his book a second title, *The art of trout-fishing. More particularly applied to clear water.* It is becoming rare, and you should pick up a copy of it if ever you get the chance. He is very definite about fishing up or down-stream. He recommends you very strongly always to work up, and to approach each pool carefully, remembering that a trout sees you well if you are on a high bank. He tells you to keep always on the shallow side, because, as a rule, the best fish will be on the deep side. To try a few casts upstream on your own side, and then to throw your

flies 'partly upstream and partly across, but more across than up, from where you are standing. You should then throw them to within an inch of the opposite bank.' I think that I had better quote in full the reasons for his method, which he gives below. Here they are:

> 'Casting across and partly upstream, for a variety of reasons, is more deadly than casting directly up. The advantage of having a number of flies is entirely lost by casting straight up, as they all come down in a line, and it is only the trout in that line that can see them; whereas if thrown partly across, they all come down in different lines, and the trout in all these lines may see them. In casting across, when the flies light, the stream carries them out at right angles to the line' (to the gut cast?) 'and they come down the stream first . . . whereas in casting straight up, if a trout is between the angler and the place where his flies light, the line passes over it before it sees the flies, and may alarm it.'

Streams, he adds, should be fished in exactly the same way as pools; fishing the side you are on straight up, and the opposite side partly across and partly up. All quiet water between two streams, and eddies behind stones, to be fished straight up, the flies being allowed to remain sufficiently long to enable the trout to see them; care must be taken to keep your line on such occasions out of the current. Stewart also recommends raising the point of the rod, to keep in touch with the flies, directly after they light on the water, and he recommends constant and perpetual casting, and using as short a line as will serve your purpose. This is a merciful disposition, both from the point of view of effectiveness in hooking trout that take your flies, and that of avoiding the physical exhaustion which would soon convert wet-fly fishing from a pleasure to a labour.

Supposing that we are wading in the river on the shallow side, far enough out in the stream to be able to reach the far bank with a shortish line, how should we apply these ideas? In what direction should we cast?

Imagining that you are at the centre of

an imaginary clock-dial, with 12 o'clock upstream, 3 o'clock pointing towards the near bank, and 9 o'clock towards the far bank, I should suggest some short casts towards 2 o'clock and 1 o'clock, the leading fly to drop

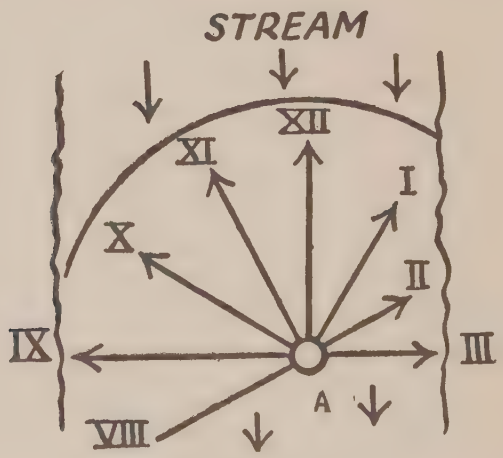

DIAGRAM 20.
WET-FLY CASTING
(*Angler at A*)

near the bank. Then a cast straight upstream, to 12 o'clock. I should then work the other way round, for a reason to be given later. I should cast straight over to the

opposite bank at 9 o'clock, and work round from left to right up to 11 o'clock, always trying to let the flies come down naturally, at the same pace as the current. Then you must face the constant difficulty, in upstream fishing with a wet-fly, of keeping your line taut enough to hook fish that take. With the casts between the 9 o'clock and the 10 o'clock directions it always seems to me to be best to keep the rod-point low, moving it gradually downstream to tighten the line, then the trout are not so likely to see the rod. From the 10 o'clock direction to straight upstream the top can be raised more, but then it is more behind the trout, and therefore less easily seen.

The reason for working upstream with successive casts (from straight across to straight upstream) is that the earlier casts are then not so likely to disturb feeding trout lying upstream, where the next casts will fall. They will not see the flies dragging fast through the water when withdrawn for the next cast, and that quick withdrawal is half the battle for success in the next throw, as we learned in our dry-fly experience.

Having covered all likely spots from one point, we wade slowly upstream, taking care not to make a wave on the surface, leaving the water at unpromising stretches and walking up the bank to the next good place. Still water, unless ruffled by a breeze, is seldom worth fishing by this method with a wet-fly, unless there are trees overhead to prevent the rod showing against the light. Concentration on the best spots is the secret of success in this fishing, which is strenuous work, leaving no margin for wasting time or labour.

With all the day before us we start, full of hope. From this time forward the beauty of our surroundings, even the songs of birds, only affect us subconsciously. Our whole attention is concentrated upon the surface of the running water, and upon our imaginings of what lies beneath its eddies and swirls, and in those spots, often the habitat for good trout, where the stream glides swiftly just above a small fall. For a time, perhaps, we have no sport. Trout are not yet feeding. Then, let us say, after much practice, our flies are coming down nicely, the line just

taut enough to keep touch with them, and suddenly 'it' comes—that 'rug' that causes the rod-point to dip and to quiver delightfully. There I leave you, with the advice to be firm with him, and to stand no nonsense. Into the net with him as quickly as you can. Trout in Devon are counted by the dozen, not by the brace. It is beyond the powers of my pen to tell you how I felt when that 'rug' first came to me. May you have dozens of them, and a heavy basket of thick little, scarlet-spotted, Devon trout to take home with you. Perhaps a few big ones, that give you great battles in strong streams. It may be that, after wandering up miles of varied water, you will still have enough energy left to fish it again, downstream, all the way back. This you will do very much in the way in which one fishes for sea-trout, so I will defer that subject until we get to them.

I shall think of you in the evening of such a day, very tired but happy, having a good tea (an unlimited supply of Devonshire cream, and good Devon butter) with the friendly farmer and his wife, who give you

a hearty welcome in their soft Devon tongue ; and, thus refreshed, you will make easy work of carrying a heavy basket homeward between the high banks and hedges of our lovely Devon lanes. If it is a light one, and even a Devon tea has not removed your weariness, you can rest content with the assurance that you have added to that reserve of past delights that every fly-fisher possesses in the secret storehouse of his memory. To-morrow you will return, as fresh and keen as ever, to the scene of your victories or defeats.

X

SEA-TROUT FISHING AND FISHING IN LOCHS

FISHING for sea-trout is grand sport, but my difficulty in writing about it is serious. Not because I have nothing to say, but because it has all been said, as well as it can possibly be said, in that book of books, *Fly-fishing*, published in 1899 by Sir Edward Grey, now Lord Grey of Fallodon. One extract from it is too good for us to miss, so I will give it in full. First he describes his feeling of restlessness in a chalk-stream valley in the south of England, when the countryside is no longer at its very best. The glory of the woods is over, and they have subsided into a sombre monotony of silence. The water-meadows are a little too soft, and the air lacks freshness. The even-flowing chalk-stream, with its mills and dams and hatches, the river which is so clear and gentle,

so docile and perfectly under control, seems just a little tame. There rises up before one's mind images of rough, noisy streams and of great brown pools clearing after a flood. One is impatient really to be there. Then, after a period of work in the stale air of cities, the scene is altered to the clean, invigorating atmosphere of a moor in Scotland, and the change to freshness and freedom brings forth this passage :

> ' The difference is so great in August, after a few days of exercise in the air of the North, that there come times when the angler, who wanders alone after sea-trout down glens and moors, has a sense of physical energy and strength beyond all his experience in ordinary life. Often after walking a mile or two on the way to the river, at a brisk pace, there comes upon one a feeling of " fitness," of being made of nothing but health and strength so perfect, that life need have no other end but to enjoy them. It is as though till that moment one had breathed through only a part of one's lungs, and as though

SEA-TROUT WATER [*p.* 106

now for the first time the whole lungs were filling with air. The pure act of breathing at such times seems glorious. People talk of being a child of nature, and moments such as these are the times when it is possible to feel so; to know the full joy of animal life—to desire nothing beyond. There are times when I have stood still for the joy of it all, on my way through the wild freedom of a Highland moor, and felt the wind, and looked upon the mountains and water and light and sky, till I felt conscious only of the strength of a mighty current of life, which swept away all consciousness of self, and made me a part of all that I beheld.'

I do not apologise for giving you that in full. Few people can write like that, and no one can do so often. Lord Grey was about thirty-seven years old when he was inspired to write that passage and his book on fly-fishing was published. We cannot do better than to follow him to Scotland for the setting of our sea-trout fishing, though we have much choice in the British Isles. We

could go after them as white trout in Ireland, as peel in Devon, as sewin in Wales, and under other names in other parts; as sea-trout also in the Orkney and Shetland Islands, where I have had the best of sport, not only in fresh water, but in the sea itself.

We have a variety of water to choose from in Scotland, in the western isles, and on the mainland, west coast or east. Let us hope that they will really be waters, not only little trickles between rocks and over semi-dry gravel-beds. We will select a small river, flowing gently in its upper reaches, through peaty, heather-covered, black soil of the upper moorland; then into a deep gorge which it has cut for itself in past ages through rocky ground, forming a little valley of which the sides are now clothed with stunted birch and rowan; then through a wider stretch of alluvial land until the fresh water meets the salt in tidal pools near the sea. We will choose a long pool in one such river which I have in my mind. It is in Caithness. There have been heavy rains, and white threads of water still glisten on

the rocky sides of the hills. At the head of our pool, in the words of Arthur Clough :

> Over a ledge of granite
> Into a granite basin the amber torrent descended . . .
> Beautiful there for the colour derived from the green rocks under ;
> Beautiful most of all, where the beads of foam uprising
> Mingle their clouds of white with the delicate hue of the stillness,
> Cliff over cliff for its sides, in the rowan and pendant birch-boughs.

After swirling through deep channels between outlying rocks, the stream, now clearing after the spate, broadens out into a long stretch of turbulent water, amber-tinted by the peat of the upper moors. Here we will cast our flies and hope for a 'rug,' which may come from a half-pounder, or from a sea-trout of almost any weight. Four and a half pounds is my own record. How shall we fish the pool, and with what tackle? The rod first, say one of 10½ feet, stiff and strong. Split cane or greenheart (for sea-trout I prefer the former). A big reel, narrow in drum, with plenty of fine 'backing' behind a heavy line, which is easier to cast against a wind. A cast of

fairly stout gut made up as in wet-fly fishing for brown trout, but for sea-trout I use only one dropper-fly, about four feet from the point, and I play for safety by using the blood-knot, shown below, to attach the dropper, which I pass through the gap A, in Diagram 21.

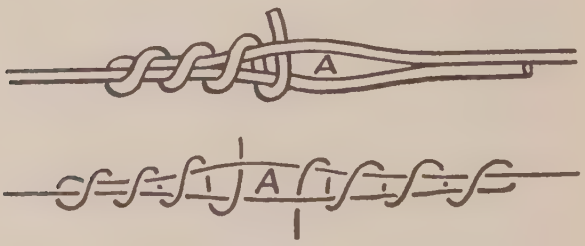

Diagram 21.
The 'Blood-Knot'

The flies I leave to your choice. I like, in such water, a 'grouse and orange' or 'teal and magenta' as leader, and my own pattern for dropper. This has a body of dull silver twist, and a soft dark grey hackle that opens and shuts; no wings. Now about the method. I should fish downstream, from the head of the pool, and the same care is not needed, in this coloured water, to keep out of sight.

Cast towards '8 o'clock' in the diagram in our last letter, and let the flies come round with the stream, swimming deep. The pull of the stream will extend the line for you. Let the line come straight downstream near your own bank, and let it hang there for a while, before you cast again.

Soon, as the flies come round—*rug*. The rod bends to the butt (keep the point up!). A mad thing has been hooked under water. Screech goes the reel, as the line runs out (keep the spinning reel-handle clear; let it touch nothing—you cannot control the first mad rush of a sea-trout). There he is, on the other side, a foot in the air, a gleam of silver beauty. Curtsey the rod for an instant, but then recover all the line that you can, or it will be drowned in the current. If the bank permits, keep abreast of your fish. Keep a taut line, letting go the reel-handle instantly for his mad rushes, and putting on all the pressure that you dare when they cease. Get him into slack water, if there is any, as soon as you can, and net him when you get the chance. The time for that will depend upon his size. Such are the joys of fishing

with a wet fly for sea-trout under the most favourable conditions, when the little river has cleared after a spate to that rich transparency of brown amber, in all its luminous hues.

Gradually the stream will run down, all too soon in these days of land drainage. Then I suggest your using the downstream method, with finer tackle, keeping out of sight, only in the strongest streams (if there are any) near the head of rocky pools. Elsewhere, the upstream methods described in the preceding chapter. I have done best, myself, in low water in the river described, by visiting the upper reaches where the stream flows deep and sluggishly between peaty banks, especially when the long pools are ruffled by an upstream breeze. And that takes us on to loch fishing (some of the best of sea-trout rivers run out of lochs), for sea-trout and for brown trout of various sorts, amongst which I have personally had the best sport with Loch Levens.

What shall I write about loch fishing? Some call it an easy sport, and so, at times, I have found it, both when fishing from a

boat and from the bank, with the wind in my favour. I have since come to the conclusion that, to do well on a loch, almost as much experience and skill is required as in fishing rivers and streams[1]; but when I have had a good day on a loch, fishing it from a boat, I still think that success has been due more to the boatman than to the angler. The usual method is to row up to windward (while doing so I generally trail my flies a long way astern, and have had large trout in that way, especially off rocky points), and then to let the boat drift down with the breeze, constantly casting down to leeward, gradually raising the point of the rod or 'handlining' (see Diagram 15) to keep the line taut enough for a trout to hook himself—or for you to hook him, whichever way you like to put it.

The point to remember is that the boat is constantly drifting towards the flies, thus slackening the line, and for good sport you are dependent upon the boatman causing the boat to drift at the right pace, not too fast,

[1] Tribute was paid above to *Loch Fishing* by R. C. Bridgett (Jenkins, London).

especially over the best spots. He can do this more easily with one angler, who kneels in the stern of the boat, as he can then use the oars to regulate the pace. With two anglers, the boat must drift sideways to the wind, so that one angler may fish from the bow and the other from the stern. If the wind is at all strong, the oarsman is then not in a position to delay the boat enough. A 'sea-anchor' up to windward, made fast by a line to the middle of the boat, is helpful. A sackful of heather with one or two light pebbles in it, or a log of wood turned crosswise, or anything of that sort will do for a sea-anchor, but beware of it if you hook a large fish that makes up his mind to circle round the boat!

Now, as usual, let us have a little talk about our surroundings. The charm of them will not lie so much in the near foreground (as it does when you are fishing running water), but in the view of distant mountain and glen, and in the wide expanse of constantly changing sky above. Such surroundings I have found at their best on the west coast of Scotland, where I had my first good sport on a loch. There, owing to the humid air,

the colours seem more vivid, and the atmospheric effects more marvellous, than in any other region that I have ever visited. I have just been refreshing my memory of such colours, for which, as Ruskin put it, there are no ideas in the mind or words in the language, by taking down from a shelf in the study where I write this a copy of *Angling and Art in Scotland*,[1] a book that was a constant joy to me during several years which I spent in an arid country, the high veld of South Africa. I agree with Ruskin. When beauty depends upon constantly changing colours, soft or brilliant, melting constantly into one another, to describe them in words is impossible, so let us get back to our fishing.

I use the same (10ft. 6ins.) split-cane rod for loch fishing as I do for sea-trout. It is powerful, and I find its strength useful to play trout quickly when fishing from a boat—an important point when drifting—and also to cast a long line when fishing from the bank or wading. You can get out a very long line, if you want to, with a short strong rod, if you gather the line in with the left hand, between

[1] By E. E. Briggs (Longmans, Green, & Co., 1908);

the reel and the first ring, and let it go just at the right moment when finishing a cast, in the way described in dry-fly fishing. Fishing from the bank, you are more independent than when fishing from a boat, but lochs vary. If the borders are boggy, or if there are too many reeds, you cannot reach the good water from the banks, and a boat is a necessity. In most lochs that I know there are shallow bays, and beyond the shallow part the water suddenly deepens. Along the outer edge of the shallow many feeding trout lie. Get your flies out as far as that, wading if necessary, but fish the shallow water to right and left of you too. When using the wet-fly or sunken-fly in lochs I put on three, as in wet-fly fishing for brown trout in rivers or streams. Rather big flies in rough water. In still water I have sometimes succeeded by sinking the flies deep (throwing a long line), and then drawing them slowly up to the top. If, under such conditions, trout are rising to floating flies, try the dry-fly, remembering that the fish are probably cruising about, their route being usually a large oval, so leave the fly on the

water, as long as it floats well, before you cast it elsewhere.

The greatest joy and excitement, to my mind, to be had out of loch fishing is when you are playing a big trout from the bank and he makes a long run away from the shore, taking out line until the drum of your reel begins to show through the backing. When that happens I pull a couple of yards off the reel, thus slackening the line, to delude him into the idea that he is free, and thus to induce him to return from whence he came. Sometimes he does, and then to feel a strain still on the line, when you wind in, gives you a great moment of relief after impending disaster. If asked to sum up my ideas about loch fishing, I should say that, while all fly-fishing has its delights, in fishing lochs you are more dependent upon success in taking fish than you are when fishing streams which give you the perpetual variety and joy of running water.

XI

SALMON FISHING, OLD STYLE

We have now reached the climax of a fly-fisher's experience in the British Isles : salmon fishing. What visions it calls up of hard, virile work in all sorts of weather ! Of a noble Scottish strath with its wild scenery and pure invigorating air. Of blank days, perhaps weeks, of strenuous and unrewarded work, saved only from despair by the hope of the morrow. Of tremendous struggles and of long drawn-out battles ending in victory. How can I possibly cover so big a subject in a couple of letters ? And how can I write of it, as I did of sea-trout and of loch fishing, in my study ? I will not try to do so. Fortunately, last season, I wrote, with the experience fresh upon me, an account of my last visit to a salmon-river in Scotland. I give it with more confidence because the gillie, who was with me, wrote after reading

it: 'I was very pleased with the bit about the salmon fishing, and I think it was the best described piece I ever read.' Enthusiasm from a Scotsman is worth having, so here is the account, untouched. I think that you will be satisfied with the amount of instruction that it contains.

Euston Station, London. Early morning. The station itself nearly empty, but echoing the sounds of the awakening city; the braying of motor-horns, a babel of human voices, and the roar of distant traffic. Those are the impressions that steal gradually upon my brain after a long journey from the extreme North of Scotland, the last few hours of it spent in restless sleep. Upon the brain only. In the heart, and in the inner consciousness, there still lingers the soothing, trilling note of a nesting curlew, and the mournful pipe of an oyster-catcher disturbed a few days ago from her nest amongst the pebbles near the bank of a salmon-river which flows amongst the heather and birch-woods of a beautiful Scottish strath, known and loved, but seldom visited, during the quarter of a century which has passed since

my first experience of such surroundings. Last year I saw it in March, frost-bound in a bitter blizzard, with deep snow on the hill-sides and deeper snowdrifts on the roads; the river itself below summer level, its streams filled with particles of floating ice; the best pools frozen over, some of them covered with snow and not distinguishable from the low-lying meadows. The only being taking the situation cheerily was a 'dipper,' quite undefeated and constantly breaking into song. In other years I have known it in April and in June. Never before had I had the good fortune to fish for salmon in Scotland in May. It is an experience not to be forgotten, partly on account of the magnificent sport itself, and partly on account of the surroundings.

'Feelings of delight,' according to the best writer on fly-fishing of my acquaintance, 'come unsought and without effort—when they are present they are everywhere about and in us like an atmosphere; when they are past it is almost as impossible to give an account of them as it is of "last year's clouds," and the attempt to analyse

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and reconstruct the sense of joy that has been and may be again, seems to result in rows of dead words.' And again: 'It may be that language lends itself more easily to forms of argument and thought than of feeling. An argument is something which can be caught and held down and strapped into sentences, but, after reading an account of a day's fishing, it is continually borne in upon one that, when all has been said, the half has not been told.' And yet one more quotation, before embarking upon the almost hopeless task of putting feelings (as distinguished from thoughts) into adequate words: 'To anyone who does share it' (a hobby), 'even a little imperfectly told, becomes interesting, and weak words begin to stir kindred memories.' Let us then, in the hope of so doing, get back from the arrival at Euston Station, refreshed by a holiday on a salmon-river in the North of Scotland, and ready for any amount of strenuous work, to the journey northward from the same station, worn out and wearied by a long spell of monotonous toil.

Owing to the attentions of ticket-collectors

I did not sleep until three-thirty. I was aroused once more before five, after which hour I did not sleep again. Northward of Perth the mountain scenery is so glorious that wakefulness is even more restful than sleep, and the new restaurant-cars provide compensation for those who miss those appetising Scottish breakfast-baskets which used to be obtainable at Kingussie. Then comes that wonderful journey northward of Inverness, with its coast scenery and view of the outlets to the sea of the best spring rivers in Scotland, sometimes (as with the Shin) of some of their best pools, and sometimes (as with the Helmsdale) of nearly the whole river, from sea to source.

'If we are to enter into the moods of Nature'—I quote again from the same author—'we must bring with us some vigour and elasticity of spirit. A feeble mind looking upon scenes with a languid eye will not feel the joy of them, and it is with Nature as with friendship—we cannot take all and bring nothing.' On my way to the taking of May salmon, I was fortunate in spending a blissful and restful week-end with friends

of many years' standing, whose dwelling is perched on cliffs overlooking the sea. Impressions remain of a true Scottish welcome, as if the intervening years had never been; of green sheep-nibbled turf and blazing yellow whins crowning the cliffs; of clusters of primroses showing where the sun shone upon the clefts and grassy dells, the whole under a dappled sky throwing soft grey shadows on the sea-surface; of stillness in the night broken only by the occasional scream of a gull. That preparation gave the 'vigour and elasticity of spirit,' required for the full enjoyment of experiences to follow, and I now give them, as described in my diary:

May 4 (*Monday*).—Fished one hour. 1 (14½lb.). No. 2 size 'Jock Scott.' *May* 5 (*Tuesday*).—1 (13lb.). No. 4 size 'Lady Caroline.' *May* 6 (*Wednesday*).—2 (10lb., 7lb.). No. 2 size 'Silver Doctor.' Cuckoo. Curlew. Fished till 2 p.m. *May* 7 (*Thursday*).—Blank. Broken by big fish after ten minutes' play. Blue hare. Herd of deer. Grouse. Curlew. Plover. *May* 8

(*Friday*).—Blank. Lovely wild country. *May* 9 (*Saturday*).—Blank. Two rises. I think gut too stout. *May* 10 (*Sunday*).—Watched the river (rising). *May* 11 (*Monday*).—Spate. No fishing. Saw young plover. *May* 12 (*Tuesday*).—1 (12½lb.). No. 2 'Black Doctor.' *May* 13 (*Wednesday.*)—1 (11½lbs.), early. No. 2 'Jock Scott.' Played deep. *May* 14 (*Thursday*).—Blank. Hot sun. Hard sky. Oyster-catcher, 3 eggs. Green plover, 4 eggs. Ringed plover, 4 eggs. *May* 15 (*Friday*).—Eight fish (of which I had three of 16lb., 11lb., 10½lb.). Similar flies. Lost one—fly came away after long play. *May* 16 (*Saturday*).—Blank. Tremendous battle with very big fish. Broke me after ten minutes' play. Small 'Jennie,' double hook.

My total, nine fish landed and three lost in ten days' and one hour's fishing. Other rod, thirteen in same time. Total, twenty-two fish.

Those extracts can certainly be described with fairness as 'rows of dead words,' also of weak ones, not at all adequate to 'stir

kindred memories,' so I will endeavour, however inadequately, to amplify and to improve upon them.

On the afternoon of arrival I sat quietly in the Lodge, writing letters and awaiting the return of the rods from the river. They returned early, soon after four o'clock, and one of them—most unselfish of mortals—impressed upon me that people do not write letters within sight of a salmon-river, and urged me to change out of travelling clothing and repair to certain pools not yet fished upon that day. I did so, after some show of (imaginary) reluctance, without wasting valuable time in changing my garments. Let us then proceed (as fast as I did, by aid of motor-car) to the first pool that I fished, and to our immediate subject, spring salmon.

Leaving the road, we pass down a steep grassy slope, through a wood of stunted birch-trees with gnarled stems and with twigs just assuming that reddish-purple tint that foreshadows the delicate green to come. We cross an expanse of purple heather, not the 'bonny purple' of heather in bloom, but the purple of leafless heather which I

infinitely prefer, as seen on wide sweeps on Scottish moorland when I have been in quest of fresh-run salmon on a spring day. And soon we come to 'it,' by which I mean the first glorious salmon-pool to be fished this year—the subject of thoughts and of dreams for many long weeks. Also, we hope, to 'him,' the first salmon. Will 'he' come, and, if so, where?

Surroundings are all forgotten. Thoughts and feelings are concentrated upon the surface of the current, and upon the question of where that pluck or gentle tug will be felt, when the line will tauten, and the raised rod will bend to the butt and thrill with vigorous life in a great combat between man and fish. 'Where do you think that he will come?' 'He may come anywhere in this water,' replies the gillie, a friend of long standing, who was with me nearly a quarter of a century ago when 'he' first took my fly in a pool not far away. 'I should begin with quite a short line at the top.' I do so, but let me here interpose a description of the pool. It is narrow at the top, and rocky, the stream turbulent in the narrowed

channel between the rocks. I swim the fly in it, easing the line down just enough to prevent the fly 'cutting,' or leaving a wake in the swift water. No result. Then the pool broadens, with still water beyond the main current, but a deep stream with a good 'pull' in it under the near bank to straighten the line well before its recovery after a cast—a great boon to the unpractised angler for salmon. The river-side rocky and difficult to negotiate. Above the rocks, bushes, their tops clipped off to help the angler. Above the bushes, grass and heather, and an easy foothold for the whole length of the pool, and away to the next.

The wind blows strongly upstream (it generally does in these parts—of that more anon) and the gillie has advised the heaviest line that a light 14-foot rod enables me to lift from the water without undue strain. He knows my limitations when the wind blows strongly in my face. I get out more line gradually, the fly at each cast making a very little plop in the still water just beyond the turbulence and then swinging round, like a pendulum, at the end of a straight

line and cast, until it has approached the near bank, been 'hung' there for a while, and then withdrawn for the next cast; each little plop a foot or two farther downstream than the last, until as much line was out as I could manage with comfort, and the process continued by walking down the bank a short step for each cast.

Then it happened. 'He' had come. The rod was bending double, and I was seeking a firm foothold for the battle. Several better fishers than I can ever hope to become have written that the supreme moment in salmon fishing is when the fly is taken. I have written the same myself. Never will I do so again, as applied to May salmon. The playing of this one I should compare, on a greatly magnified scale, with the playing of a lively 3-lb. trout in chalk-stream fishing, using 4 x gut. I was using the finest of salmon gut. I suppose that the battle lasted for about ten or twelve minutes in that strong water. It seemed like an hour. I never felt sure of success for a single moment until the fish (a silver beauty) was in the net. That, not the hooking, was to me the supreme

moment, and so it was for each of the May salmon which I landed, with one exception, which just pulled steadily until I got him into a backwater, where he swam into the net. To certain supreme disasters during the playing I shall refer later. They taught me never again, with May salmon, to imagine that the excitement concluded with the hooking. One more word about netting, instead of following the practice, universal on some rivers, of gaffing. As that first fish lay on the short green turf between the dark heather, the memory occurred to me of a remark by one of the truest sportsmen of my acquaintance. 'I would as soon gaff a beautiful girl as I would a spring salmon.' I agreed with his views.

That, then, is an expansion—I hope not to too great a length—of the entry '*May* 4 (*Monday*).—Fished one hour. 1 (14½ lb.) etc.,' from my diary. Lest it should sound un-English, I have not mentioned having broken into song from sheer joy of life during the exhilaration of that fishing battle, a joy which has been conspicuously absent from real battles in which it has been my lot to

take part. Of the other incidents connected therewith, I remember best having instructed the chauffeur to hide away my fish, which he was displaying prominently by the roadside, so as not to flaunt my wholly undeserved success before the other rod—a far better fisherman than myself—to whom fate had decreed a succession of about twenty-one blank days of salmon fishing (a good example of the amazing differences of luck, the main factor in success in the sport), and the influence which this early success had upon myself. It enabled me to face 'blanks,' and to get full value in enjoyment out of my surroundings, during several days and hours of hard work with no tangible result.

Let us, before expanding more of the diary, try to recall some features of those surroundings, which go so far towards making salmon fishing in Scottish air and amongst Scottish scenery the grand sport that it is. To those who hold that the taking of salmon is the only, or even (under certain conditions) the chief, attraction of the sport, I suggest the taking of them, with a prawn, if numbers are wanted, from a river in the South of

England. That also is sport, but the monotonous meadow-land and less invigorating air cannot be compared with the wild surroundings and fine atmosphere of a Scottish strath. What, then, are these surroundings, as I found them, for the first time, in the month of May? I will take out of the diary a sample blank day. Or rather let us, in order to economise in space and to compensate us for getting no fish, take several blank days and roll them into one. It is fair to do so, as the experience, so tersely recorded in the diary, were repeated in most, if not in all, of them. Let us take *May* 7 (*Thursday*) to *May* 11 (*Monday*) inclusive, remembering that on *May* 6, early in the morning, I heard the first note of the cuckoo, that sounded within earshot of the Lodge as I hung out of my bedroom window, taking in the beauties of the scene; the soft outline of the red-purple birch-woods clothing the slopes on one side of the valley, and dark-purple of the grouse-moor on the other side; between them the gleam of water, marking, here and there, the curve of the river, of streams and pools of infinite variety.

The beats which did not 'give a fish' at all on those blank days varied much, both in their surroundings and in their accessibility. Let us take one that involved a long drive by car and then a longish walk across the heather to the nearest pool. I once saw a wonderful cinematograph film of salmon fishing, and since then I have taken every possible opportunity of seeing it again. It does not, I hope, smack of advertisement—the bane of the age—to mention that its name is *Battles with Salmon*, and that the New Era Films Company control it. One of the earliest 'captions' (I think that is the right word) is 'Spring-time in Scotland,' and the picture shown is one of a sheep and a lamb. The producer was right. Sheep with lambs are the form of life most in evidence during our drive along the road to the beat, and careful driving is needed, as the lambs seem always, like the hens of England, to be on a different side of the road from that which they prefer when a motor-car comes on the scene.

Of other forms of life the green plovers are the most active, screaming and wheeling

about as we pass. " Their young ones have hatched out," says one of the gillies, and sure enough they have. We succeed in spotting two of them, jolly little fluff-balls on stilts, and we stop the car to inspect and handle them, the parents violently protesting and apparently giving contradictory advice, as one little fluff-ball sprinted away on his long legs, tumbling constantly as he went. The other crouched and camouflaged, melting into its surroundings. When we leave the road a cock grouse explodes himself out of the heather close to our feet. ' The world's coming to an end ! ' says he (as Charles Kingsley tells us). ' Kuk ! kuk ! go and catch spiders ! Kuk ! kuk ! ' says his mate, busy with the cares of housekeeping for the little brood. Then a blue hare, still retaining parts of his white winter coat, lollops slowly away from us, occasionally stopping to examine the intruders. We come upon wide stretches of heather and moorland, and note a fine herd of deer afar off. Beyond again, miles away, are great mountains—' Bens '—with snow upon their summits. The whole air is trilling with

the curlew's nesting-note—'The clear air vibrates with the most wonderful of all the notes of birds, the prolonged spring notes of curlews, the most healing sound that ever was, full of rest and joy.' Such words, used by Sir Edward Grey (as he then was) in his *Fly-fishing*, cannot fail to stir kindred memories; they form anything but a 'row of dead words.'

These are samples of the bird-notes to be heard on that wild moor, and to them I would add the mournful piping of oyster-catchers, disturbed from their nest (?) on a bank of smooth pebbles, on which (on another beat) we found also (within five yards) a green plover's and a ringed plover's nest, each with four eggs, the last-named nest a perfect specimen, both of camouflage and of beauty. The eggs were invisible amongst their surroundings, and the nest beneath them a cup-shaped declivity lined with sparkling little crystals, apparently collected for their beauty. The cock bird, quite tame, walked about within a few yards of us. Terns, the graceful sea-swallows, were also nesting on that beat, as were sandpipers,

redshanks, ring-ousel, and snipe; but I must really leave the birds and get to our subject of salmon, though I cannot do so without mentioning the opportunities that offered of studying the grace of bird-flight as you see it with white birds, like terns and oyster-catchers, against a background of dark heather. We are inclined to miss this beauty, when we are on the seashore, for want of a dark background.

Salmon were 'jumping' everywhere on those blank days. There must have been thousands of them in the river, wherein the mystery of their life and habits has never yet been solved. 'Jumping' is a word that can suitably be applied to a few, but not to the majority of them, as seen in May. Then they come out of the water and curve in again, full of purpose, moving fast in pursuance of that purpose, whatever it is—'running,' it may be, to the pools above. When they are doing that around you, and your fly is in the water, you can take the phenomenon in two ways, according to your temperament and to the degree of your exhaustion by much casting without result.

You can view these 'jumping' fish with exasperation, or with admiration. The success with which my holiday began enabled me to choose the latter course, and I thought again of Charles Kingsley, sitting on his old screw in the pinewoods near Sandhurst and rhapsodising about the grace of fox and hound, when he was unable to follow the chase. Then of his going home and writing the best of his prose idylls, 'The Winter Garden.' There is nothing, to my mind, in the grace of movement of fox or of hound that comes near to the beauty and appearance of well-balanced strength of a May salmon speeding upstream, sometimes showing the silver gleam of his side in a leap clear of the surface. And even if fish which show do not take, you fish on expectantly, in the hope that there are others in the pool that will. A blank day in May offers more impetus and encouragement to persistence than a blank day in March, when no fish are showing, and, exhausted beyond endurance, you are given to wondering whether salmon really do come into fresh water at all at that time of the year.

Even if one avoids exasperation at visible salmon that refuse to take a fly, on the plea that it destroys pleasure and contravenes Izaak Walton's (and St. Paul's) great maxim, 'study to be quiet,' there is no avoiding speculation about better methods, if any, to induce them to do so, and so to improve one's sport. Having been out of touch with brother fly-fishers for a long time, it was not until I was just on the point of leaving for my holiday that I heard from one of them that fly-fishing for salmon had been revolutionised by new methods of casting. A skilled fisher on the Dee, he told me, had recently taken fifty spring fish, while the other rods had taken seven fish among them. This man used a 12-foot rod and very small flies (No. 7 size, I was told), even in spring. He greased his line. Instead of the traditional method of casting downstream, he cast across and slightly upstream, letting the fly come round without a trace of drag, lifting his floating line off the surface and switching it upstream occasionally to keep the line straight, without dragging the fly. He had enough mastery of rod and line to enable him to do this

effectively. He proved the soundness of his method by his great successes. I soon found, in conversation with other rods and with gillies, that his fame had spread to various salmon-rivers, and that others had adopted the greased line, but not, so far as I could gather, with quite the same success. The exponent of the new art to whom I have referred sinks his fly a few inches below the surface. You shall know more of him in due course.

'*May* 10, *Sunday*, etc.,' was a day of storm and rain. Miniature cascades showed white threads of water on the hill-sides, and indicated the certainty of a spate. On '*May* 11, *Monday*, etc.,' the river was up, surging and foam-flecked, and our beat too high to fish, though we did try it for a short time in the evening. '*May* 12, *Tuesday*. 1 (12½ lb.)' calls for little comment. That was the fish that played normally, without exciting incident. On May 13 the 11½ lb. came within a few minutes of my beginning to fish the first pool. He came in a deep, swirling stream, just below where the whole river, confined between two rocks, comes roaring down a fall.

He proved, on closer acquaintance, to be the most beautiful and gracefully made, small-headed, bright, silver-sided fish which it has ever been my good fortune to land. When 'he' came I was perched upon a rock near the head of the pool, to which stand I had dropped from a shelving ledge above. The fish worked downstream, so I handed the rod to the gillie to hold while I negotiated the overhanging ledge. He left me in order to follow the fish. Having a rather badly disabled hand, I failed in my climb, and remained helpless over the deep swirling torrent until he came back to me, letting out line. The gillie gave me a helping hand while he played the fish with the other, and then he returned the rod. The fish kept very deep in the water, nearly the whole of the seven-foot cast of gut being submerged, and he 'jigged' excruciatingly, but was landed at last.

The rest of the day was blank. So was the whole of the next day, sufficiently described in the diary as '*May* 14, *Thursday*.—Hot sun. Hard sky, etc.' Then came a great experience, a day in a thousand, when sky, light, weather, and water were all in our

favour, and fish came well throughout the day. '*May* 15, etc.' (See diary.) My three fish (out of the eight that were borne across the long expanse of heather to the road) gave many thrills in the playing. So did one from which the fly came away after a long struggle. There was a strong wind, so I 'backed' the pools, instead of fishing downstream in the usual way. 'Backing,' of course, means casting at the bottom of the pool, down and across, and then walking slowly up the bank until the fly is on one's own side, and so on, *da capo*. This is sometimes the most deadly procedure with an upstream wind; and is it not written in that delightful little seventeenth-century pamphlet signed 'G. M.,' for Gervase Markham, and called *The Young Sportsman's Delight and Instructor in Angling, Fowling, Hawking, Hunting, etc.* (whereof the published price was sixpence, and the price paid for a copy at a sale in the year of the war 1916 was £57 10s.), that 'Salmon bites best about 3 in the afternoon, especially from May to September, and when the water is clear, and a little wind, and the wind bloweth against the Stream'?

We had to leave the river early, or we might have made a bigger score. Personally, I was ready to leave, having had a grand day's sport, and both tops of my favourite rod having been broken—one by myself, by laying it carelessly down on the ground when running to see a particularly beautiful fish that had just been taken out in the net, the other top broken by someone else, who was trying the casting-power of the rod. I had had a really good day, and 'too much is enough,' as the Frenchman said when incited to help himself a third time to a favourite dish. And that takes us to the last day. '*May* 16, *Saturday*.—Blank. Tremendous battle with very big fish, etc.'

Readers who have followed me so far in this recital may have noticed that a somewhat similar incident on May 7 has not been enlarged upon. I thought that one tragedy was enough. To have described two would have overloaded my account with a weight of gloom, and so given a false general impression of the happiest and most light-hearted fortnight in the experience of a lifetime. Figure to yourself a persistently hopeful angler

fishing down a deep, streamy run near the head of an open pool. The casting easy, from a low bank of pebbles which gave a good foothold. The opposite bank a miniature cliff of clay, topped with heather, and intercepted at one spot by an agricultural drain, of which we shall hear more anon. Deep water under the bank, and a good steady stream to pull the fly. All other conditions adverse. Water considered too low for this particular spot to hold taking fish. A borrowed rod, to which I was unaccustomed, and a necessity to use trout gut ('stout lake') and a very small fly.

Well, to cut the recital as short as possible, 'he' came, half-way down the pool. He came gently, just showing a fin and a broad back. Then followed ten mad delirious minutes, the climax of many years of fly-fishing experience, and a supreme summit of adventure. It is not possible to describe all my impressions of the movement of that great thing beneath the water that were crowded into those few minutes of wild, but firmly repressed, excitement. A steady, rapid irresistible procession to the pool some way

above, spray spouting up from where the cast cut the water against the stream. A long run downstream to the next pool below the one of hooking. A desperate effort to haul the head of the great leviathan out of the strong stream, where he found his strength, into a still backwater which might exhaust him, and the fear of putting an excessive strain upon the tackle. The feeling of helplessness on gaining no control whatever over the situation after what seemed to be long ages of conflict, but with it complete certainty of ultimate success, as the great fish was obviously well hooked, and I had no difficulty in following along the bank and keeping the rod up and level with him.

What seemed to be a few years of anxiety followed, allayed by that feeling of confidence. Then the fish bored steadily upstream, so close to the opposite bank that his side seemed to be rubbing along it, until he came to the spot where the agricultural drain entered the river. There the line seemed to stop, but curiously. It seemed to stop before the fish did, and the strain was no longer alive, but steady. I eased the line at once, thinking

that the gut might be round a sunken snag. A despairing glance over my shoulder at the gillie showed me that he was taking off his boots and socks, and turning his nether garments up to the thigh. He went down to a shallow run below the pool, taking the landing-net, and waded across. Came up the bank to the fateful spot, and reached out the net-handle to clear the line. It was round a sunken tree, probably washed down that drain in the last flood. Was the fish on? . . .

I eased the line further, to aid the gillie in clearing the gut from the tree, laid the borrowed rod down, very gently, on the pebbles, and sought a convenient seat on the heather, where I sat for some time, head in hands, pondering over my past as a fisherman, and thinking that, as such, I could have no future. *Ichabod!* By a curious mischance that tree was lying at an angle that caused the gut inevitably to slide down it and become fast, as it still was. The great fish had bored his way onward upstream, without showing and without giving any indication of the break-away. When it

occurred I do not know. Within half an hour I was fishing another pool, with keenness fully restored.

On my return to the Lodge, I visited, elsewhere, the stuffed corpse in a glass case of the heaviest fish ever taken in the river. Having ascertained privately (from the daughter of the house) that that fish weighed 45 lb., I sought out its taker, and told him that I had just lost one of 46 lb. I told him the whole tale afterwards, but let us leave my (?) fish at that weight. It will serve as well as any other.

Such are the vicissitudes and the ups and downs of May salmon fishing in the North of Scotland as I have known it. Treasured memories of every incident are recalled by the mind during the long journey southwards. They will remain in the heart for years. And so we arrive, rejuvenated and ready for a strenuous spell of work, at the point from which we started. 'Euston Station. Early morning. . . . Echoing the sounds of awakening London; the braying of motor-horns, a babel of voices, and the roar of distant traffic.'

To that I will add only that I use a 14-foot greenheart rod for salmon fishing, and flies varying from 8/0 size in March to No. 6 in June, and that I have never fished for salmon later than that in the season. The gut varying in thickness from stout salmon in March to the finest sea-trout gut that I dare to use in June. As you can now cast a fly for trout, all that I need add about casting is that the timing of a larger rod is *much* slower, and that, with a two-handed rod, the work of the lower hand is very helpful to lift a long line off the water for the next cast. The next (and last) letter will be about new methods.

XII

THE NEW SALMON FISHING

And now, with reluctance, I must bring these letters on fly-fishing to a close, but before I do so I want to remind you about what I wrote in my last letter about exasperation when salmon are showing themselves, but not taking. It has recently been discovered that the reason why they do not take is not the fault of the salmon, but of the fisher.

Under such conditions they can be taken in suitable waters with a large, bristly dry-fly, fished as for trout. Mr. Hewitt, a great exponent of this art, uses a 10-ft. 6-in. split cane rod for casting, to which an extra piece can be added to the butt for playing a fish with two hands and a special reel, which he always turns upwards to play a fish.[1]

I am now going to tell you about the new

[1] See *Country Life*, London, March 25, 1926.

method, mentioned in my last letter, of fly-fishing for salmon with a greased line, based on no less authority than that of the skilled fisher on the Dee to whom I referred. I have just had a letter from him, which speaks for itself. Will you understand then that 'I' from henceforward until the last paragraph, means the inventor of the new art, Mr. A. H. E. Wood?

'I will try and do my best to give a rough idea of what I try to do. To begin with, when the water is suitable, which is not often up here, I fish the same as Mr. La Branche and Hewitt, that is absolutely dry fly, but the method I use most and which seems to suit this country best is what I call a semi-dry; my aim and object is to keep the fly as near the surface as possible if not on it, that is that my fly is sometimes floating, but not sitting up the same as it would in dry-fly fishing. More often than not the fly is just under the surface, and I try and keep it as near the surface as I can, as long as it does not cause a wave or skim on the surface. As to what the fly does, perhaps the description of a friend describes it better than I can. He

said, " You appear to let it float down like a dead thing." Of course, the line is greased, but not the cast, as the cast soon gets plenty of grease on it, and I like the last yard or so to be sunk.

' I invariably cast straight across the water, if anything slightly upstream, and, unless I throw a curved cast, I almost immediately lift the line off the water and pass it upstream above the fly. I then let the whole thing float downstream, always keeping the line switched so that the fly is leading. I keep the point of the rod near the water, and usually let it lead the line down. I make no movement of the rod beyond moving it downstream. This lets the fly drift downstream and slowly into the bank, making a very flat portion of a circle. I use nothing over a 12-foot rod, with line to suit the rod, and cast as fine as I dare use. I generally tie them together myself with a taper, generally half one size and half another. The size of fly I use is a No. 1 hook down to No. 12, early in the year generally No. 1 to 3, and later getting to smaller sizes. When the kelts have left the water, I use a lighter rod of about the same

length, with lighter tackle, and when the water is dead-low in hot weather, I use a still lighter rod of about the same length, and very light line to suit, with as light a cast as I dare use, the cast always depending on the strength of the rod.

'I do not strike at all, but let the fish hook themselves, except when using No. 1 to 3 hooks, when I do not actually strike, but tighten quickly. The light cast does not allow striking with the rods I use, and I find that I get more fish by leaving it alone. By doing so you invariably hook the fish well back in the mouth, as, by the time the line begins to tighten, it has drifted below the fish, therefore pulls the fly back downstream, instead of upstream and out of its mouth. With the very small flies this is important. You have to be much slower before you feel the fish; in fact, in very strong water with small fly I invariably drop the point of my rod straight downstream towards the bank and let go a yard or two of line, and wait until the line is tightened by the current. I do not find that the fish ever get rid of the fly before the line is tightened by the current only.

'Almost every fish is a head and tail rise, which, as you can imagine, adds greatly to the interest and excitement of the fishing. As a rule the rise is very slow and deliberate, not quick like a trout. There is a good bit to be learnt in switching over the line, which absolutely controls the fly, both in its speed in travelling downstream and its position in the different eddies. You must keep the line floating or the fly will sink too deep, although occasionally you do get a fish when the line has partly sunk the fly a foot or so down. If it is clear water I find that it is very important that the fly should be as close to the surface as possible, very often only about a quarter of an inch below the surface. You soon get to know the exact position of the fly even if you cannot see it, but as a rule one can.

'I am not a believer in fish ever "coming short." This you may say is rather a big remark to make, but the more I fish the more I am convinced that it is not the fish coming short, *but the fisherman*. It is very nice to come home and say, "Had a dull day—the fish are coming so short," but I find by

manipulating you do not give them the chance of coming short, and if I get a pull it is my own fault. Some days I get a good many, but I still know it is my own fault, and I think I am gradually improving ; at any rate, every day I go out I learn something. As to fishing, I do not think you will find much trouble in lifting the line upstream. If you are an old hand at dry-fly work, you will find little trouble.

'As to flies, remember I do not mind what fly I have, and do not use many, generally only two, but each one in *all sizes*, No. 1 to 12. In the summer-time or in low water beginning end of April, I use those Hardy's light summer hooks tied still lighter than what Hardy generally sells. If you are ordering and wanting the same as I use, you would have to tell him that they have to be dressed the same as he supplies to me, and not his usual light summer dressing. I have mine dressed rather shorter, and with very little wing, but he tells me that most people do not like to buy my actual pattern, as it seems too skimpy. There appears to be a lot of bare hook, and so there is, and I like it.' . . .

With that valuable advice, from a more up-to-date salmon fisher than myself, I close these letters, wishing you many happy fly-fishing holidays and the peace that comes therewith. Some day, I imagine, we must all come to the time

> When all the world is old, lad,
> And all the trees are brown,
> And all the sport is stale, lad,
> And all the wheels run down.

When that time does come, I believe that the days that we have spent in fly-fishing will have helped us to grasp the meaning of that wise old saw: 'Those whom the gods love—are young when they die.'

THE END

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